“IT’S NEVER BEEN THIS BAD…EVER”: AN ANALYSIS OF K-12 TEACHERS’ STANDPOINTS RELATED TO PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION

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With the rise of “helicopter” parents within primary and secondary education, school officials nationwide have started to address how to manage parental involvement in the educational system, specifically with regard to parent-teacher communication. Beginning in the 1980s, school administrators actively implemented programs targeting increased parental involvement in K-12 public schools, though the use of contact and relationship building strategies, in order to substantiate school-teacher-parent communication and further parental influence over decision making processes. While administrators and parents may view parent-teacher interactions as productive, teachers’ negative experiences with parents may lead to stress, burnout, and attrition. Researchers have indicated that between 20 and 50% of first through third year teachers leave the profession due to increased, long-term stress, unrealistic workload, and an overall feeling of decreased personal and professional fulfillment. Likewise, through educational reform initiatives to standardize curriculum and increase parental involvement within public schools, teachers’ roles within the educational system have shifted from positions of power, to figureheads for the system. The purpose of this study is to examine public school K-12 teachers’ standpoints as they relate to parent-teacher communication.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have described parents’ attempts to challenge teacher authority in the classroom via a shift in perceived power and a question of professional respect for their position (Keller & Thomas-Seltzer, 2007). For example, one teacher stated, “I didn’t think it would be like this, you know, I thought [parents would] have more respect for you and your job. But…you don’t run your own classroom” (p. 18). Another teacher commented:

I can tell you this is my first and last year here. You know, it’s never been this bad, ever. You just…you wake up and don’t want to deal with any of it. I can’t stay and teach at a school with parents this over-involved in your teaching, and administrators who will hang you out to dry. It’s not worth it. (p. 23)

These statements appear to be consistent with researchers’ (Cullingford, 1996; MetLife, 2005; National Education Association (NEA), 2007; Strauss, 2006; Thomas, 1996) findings related to the trend of parental over-involvement throughout the last two decades. As parental involvement continues to increase within the public school systems, so does teachers’ discontent with the current state of affairs. Roughly 20% of new teachers polled indicated that interpersonal relationships with parents ranked more unsatisfactory than any other work-related relationship (including teacher-student, teacher-coworker, and teacher-administrator) (MetLife, 2005). While positive consequences for students may result from increased parent-teacher contact, including higher academic achievement (Burns, 1993; Morrison, 1978; Swap, 1987), teacher morale and job satisfaction may decrease, ultimately leading to teacher stress (Haberman, 2000; Jepson & Forrest, 2006), burnout, and leaving the profession (Wilhelm et al., 2000), thus creating unintended negative consequences related to the “positive” shift towards greater parental involvement.

Cullingford (1996) noted the development of an “open-door policy” in which parents
experienced the greatest level of participation and influence over their children’s education than ever before through education reform at local and national levels. This development shifted the traditionally conceived centralized organization of schools, with teachers assuming the primary role in children’s education, to more leveled roles in which parents are nearly as involved as teachers. Whereas teachers during previous generations maintained a fairly autonomous role in managing their classrooms and experienced minimal contact with parents as part of the education process, the reforms over the past two decades have altered the nature of teaching (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996). While researchers (Penn & Childers, 1993; Wolfendale, 1996) have indicated a link between parental involvement and student academic success, the substantial changes made within the educational field to incorporate more parent contact with schools may have created unintended consequences with regard to parent-teacher communication.

Through active encouragement for greater parent involvement by school administration and the mandated communication implemented via the United States government, the increase in communication parents engage in about their children’s education creates additional responsibilities for teachers. Strauss (2006) stated, “Parents began spending more time in classrooms. Then they began calling teachers frequently. Then came e-mails, text messages—sometimes both at once” (p. 2). The increase in parent-teacher contact demands greater time from teachers through face-to-face meetings and written correspondence, and additional interpersonal demands and stresses related to incorporating parents within schools (Thomas, 1996). MetLife (2005) indicated that while a majority of primary and secondary school teachers surveyed reaffirmed the need to maintain communication with parents and encourage involvement in order to ensure student success in the classroom, roughly three-quarters of respondents stated parents viewed teachers as adversaries.
Teachers and administrators in public schools have recently brought to light the difficulties in managing parent-teacher relations and have highlighted the amplified nature and negative consequences of parental desire for control (NEA, 2007; Stauss, 2006). Cullingford (1996) argued “rather than let the teachers get on with their roles, the parents are not only to be kept informed but make their wishes felt” (p. 2). Dubbed “millennial” (Strauss, 2006), “hovering” (Gibbs, 2005), or “helicopter” (Carroll, 2005; Jayson, 2007; Landau, 2008) parents, researchers have stressed the overbearing nature of parents in schools today, and the need for intervention. The NEA described the emergence of “helicopter parents,” defined as over-involved parents with children ranging from kindergarten to college, and stated, “there are far more aggressive helicopter parents who threaten, intimidate, and bully educators into meeting their demands” (p. 1). As perceived “experts on their children” (NEA), helicopter parents maintain a vested interest in their children’s education and may affect teachers’ perceptions of their competence as educators as well as their sense of control within their classrooms. Gibbs illustrated the extent of control parents exert within schools, citing parent-teacher contact over grades, unnecessary discipline in the classroom, and desire for influence in classroom management (homework and attendance policies) as points of contention for “helicopter” parents. Teachers, already coping with work overload and time constraints detracting from planning periods and personal time (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005), are forced to manage increased communication from over-involved parents. Consequently, school officials have created parent-training programs to help encourage positive interactions with schools and kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) students (Hupp, 2008; Strauss, 2006). Administrators designing parent-targeted programs aim to increase parental awareness of students struggling in school. Because the programs do not necessarily foster more constructive parent-teacher
relationships, school officials have started to address how to manage the effects of parental involvement in the education process.

With the increase in teacher turnover across the nation, the problem of teacher stress and burnout as related to workplace demands warrants further attention. The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) reported that the turnover rate for teachers in public schools is roughly 16.8 percent (accounting for individuals transferring jobs and leaving the profession), up 1.7 percent from the 2000-2001 survey of American teachers. Additionally, the percentage of teachers in public schools leaving the profession (not transferring to another job within the educational field) is at the highest point in 16 years. The turnover trend also extends to new teachers entering the profession, and researchers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Geving, 2007; NEA, 2006; Viadero, 2005; Yong & Yue, 2008) have indicated that between 20 and 50 percent of first through third year teachers leave the field due to increased, long-term stress, lack of planning time, unrealistic workload, and an overall feeling of decreased personal and professional fulfillment. Ultimately, the problematic nature of teacher-parent communication contributes to the increased levels of job dissatisfaction, which may help to explain the high turnover rates within the profession (MetLife, 2005). Unable to cope effectively with burnout resulting from negative parent communication and increased stress as a result from managing ever-increasing levels of interpersonal communication within the organization, many teachers are electing to leave the educational field for other, less stressful professions (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; MetLife, 2005). This mass exodus leaves the education field bereft of experienced teachers, and reaffirms the burnout cycle.

Education departments at higher education institutions consistently fail to train aspiring teachers in how to manage parent interactions, and provide inadequate coping mechanisms that
largely place conflict management on the teachers without support from administrations (Jehlen, 2008). Teachers, perceiving a lack of organizational support when confronting parental issues, may experience increased levels of stress and ultimately burnout leading to decreased workplace performance and the deterioration of personal and professional satisfaction.

Researchers (Burns, 1993; Morrison, 1978; Penn & Childers, 1993; Swap, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996) have affirmed the need for parental involvement in schools, and the positive results for children, parents, and schools, as a result of strong home-school ties; however, researchers have neglected the role of teachers in managing the increased levels of communication. This gap in the literature indicates a clear need to study this population, which is stressed, burnt out, and suffering attrition, as they struggle to cope with issues perceived as negative, job-related tasks. As parent-teacher contact increases, administrators and researchers should pay more attention to data indicating that those interpersonal encounters are the “least-desirable/most unfulfilling” for teachers (MetLife, 2005). Through the current disproportionate quantity of data related to parental involvement versus teacher understanding of parental involvement, researchers have failed to address both sides of the home-school partnership, and have overlooked the importance of teachers in these interactions. A possible way to understand the high level of teacher stress, burnout, and turnover may lie in understanding how teachers conceptualize parent-teacher communication. Researchers (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005; Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey, & Bassler, 1988; Buunk et al., 2007; Dunham, 1992; Ray & Miller, 1991; Walsh, 1998) have addressed other organizational issues related to teacher turnover (personality factors, organizational structure, low pay, etc.), however they have not studied how teachers perceive, interpret, and manage parent-teacher interactions. Given the growing turnover within this population, and the high risk for work-related personal and professional stresses,
communication scholars should address the issue of parent-teacher communication as a possible contributor to stress and burnout.

Standpoint theory provides a framework for conceptualizing teacher perceptions of parent-teacher communication, specifically with regard to power and control within public school systems. Scholars (Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000) have indicated the need for increased incorporation of traditional feminist theoretical approaches to organizational communication research, primarily in an attempt to address understudied or marginalized populations. Feminist standpoints traditionally focus on the positioning of females and marginalized groups within patriarchal structures, a condition certainly prevalent in many K-12 public schools (Skrla, 2001), and the points of view emerging from socially created categories. Furthermore, the tenants of the theory can be utilized on a more general level to analyze constructs of power and marginalized voices within organizations.

Hartsock’s (1987) conceptualization of standpoint theory provides a basis for addressing and explaining teachers’ perspectives in relationship to parent-teacher communication through the explication of power issues related to social positioning within hierarchies. Scholars (Dougherty, 1999; Hartsock, 1987) have indicated that socially created groupings used to categorize individuals significantly impact one’s worldview, ultimately creating a system of privilege and power. Society tends to emphasize the dominant group ideology, thus reinforcing the power associated with this group, and marginalizing individuals outside of the privileged group.

Dominant social groups have the power to define and categorize over-arching realities through their advancement of dominant ideology and reality for all groups; groups other than the dominant group struggle to relate their socially constructed standpoints within the larger ideology. Hallstein (1999) argued that through power constructions and the development of
standpoints, individuals outside of the dominant ideology assume a subservient role within the social structure, and are “systematically exploited, oppressed, excluded, devalued, and dominated” (p. 35). Members of groups outside of the majority tend to be less influenced by the biases of dominant ideology, and may provide a more accurate, representative understanding of power and realities within organizations (Dougherty, 1999; Hallstein, 1999; Hartsock, 1987).

Through a shift in organizational and power dynamics from teachers as the authority figures within classrooms to parents playing a more central role in the classroom and education process, teachers may experience a sense of marginalization. Because of the inherent power structures created within public school systems, teachers may find themselves limited in their roles by national and state legislation, policies enacted by administrators, and parental demands related to in-class performance and communication. The dominant ideologies and realities created by parents and administrators can constrain teachers and their abilities to voice concerns and opinions within schools. As administrators reshape power and organizational structure within public schools through policy changes that encourage parental involvement, teachers are shifted to the margins of the dominant group, and struggle to maintain a voice and situate their realities against prevailing ideologies. Orbe (1998) indicated, “Recognizing the impact of a person’s field of experience, according to this perspective, is essential to understanding his or her perceptions of daily communication experiences” (p. 5). The standpoints of teachers related to increased communication are essential in understanding the construction of their realities outside of the dominant, parent-centered system and could provide insight into the trends of teacher dissatisfaction and turnover.

My purpose in this study is to examine K-12 public school teachers’ perceptions of parent-teacher communication. As parental involvement in schools continues to increase, I argue
that communication studies researchers need to address the consequences for teachers in terms of perceived role within the education system, emotional labor, and stress and burnout. In chapter two I review literature related to understanding the ramifications of increased parent-teacher communication including: the movement toward parental involvement and the shifting roles of parents and teachers in the educational system, emotional labor related to the teaching profession, teacher stress and burnout, and the viewpoints of teachers through the implementation of standpoint theory. In the third chapter I describe the methodology for conducting this study, focusing specifically on participants, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. In chapter four, I outline the results of the study in relationship to the three research questions guiding the study, and provide participant insight into teacher positioning within the educational system, emotional labor, and factors and outcomes of stress and burnout. Finally, in the fifth chapter I identify the limitations of this study and explain the implications of the findings from chapter four in terms of theory and praxis.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The turnover rate among K-12 public school teachers continues to rise, and the current turnover rate of 16.8 percent ranks much higher than the average among other professions. This increase parallels the rise in parent-teacher interaction as a result of education reform plans. Thus, questions arise about the potential influence of parent-teacher interaction on teachers’ stress, burnout, and turnover. While a number of scholars (Adelmann, 1995; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Timms, Graham, & Caltabiano, 2006; Travers & Cooper, 1996; van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999; Yong & Yue, 2007) have addressed the propensity for stress and burnout among teachers, and the emotional labor demands related to the role of teaching, researchers have failed to focus on the role of increased parent-teacher communication within the stress and burnout cycle.

Additionally, researchers have yet to examine the possibility that teachers’ standpoints about parent interactions differ from those of administrators’ and parents’ because of the additional role demands unique to teachers as they shift from authority figure to facilitators of policies and demands from administrators and parents. In order to better understand teachers’ perceptions of parent-teacher communication I address involvement trends within public schools, the emotional labor required to manage interpersonal interactions, the development of stress and burnout among teachers, and the differing standpoints of marginalized groups related to shifts in power and non-dominant ideology. Through an examination of these issues one can better understand the possible relation between teachers’ positioning within public school hierarchies, the onset of stress and burnout through parent-teacher communication, and the alternative viewpoints teachers may provide explaining their unique perspectives.
Thus, in this chapter I review four primary bodies of literature: standpoint theory, parental involvement in the education system, emotional labor, and stress and burnout among teachers. Standpoint theory will serve as a theoretical framework for explaining the marginalized positions of teachers caused by their positions between two power sources: administrators and parents. This framework will be applied to the evolving landscape of K-12 education, with a focus on changes in parent-teacher communication and its effects on emotional labor as well as stress and burnout as negative outcomes for teachers and as precursors to turnover.

Standpoint Theory

Researchers (Allen, 1998; Buzzanell, 1994; Collins, 1986; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000; Harding, 2007) have utilized standpoint theories, specifically related to feminist studies, in order to examine groups marginalized through the realities created by dominant social groups and the perpetuation of dominant ideologies. Harding (2007) conceptualized dual realities as the existence of two distinct, but coexisting, perceptions based on social positioning. Through the notion of dual realities, that dominant and marginalized groups maintain two distinct viewpoints situated within social status and context, scholars (Collins, 1986; Dougherty, 1999; Harding, 2007) have argued that the vantage points of groups outside of the dominant culture may provide a more accurate view of a given situation or occurrence. These groups reflect positions not inherently linked to the privilege related to power, while acknowledging the dominant perspectives. Thus, through the ability to understand the dual realities of both dominant and non-dominant standpoints, non-dominant groups provide insight situated against prevailing ideologies. Harding (2007) argued, “Standpoint theories analyzed causes of the gaps between actual and ideal relations between knowledge and power, and reflected on the causes of
the successes of feminist research in the social sciences and biology” (p. 45). Researchers developing standpoint theory rooted the concept within feminist epistemology, and argued that several social and political factors impact an individual’s perception of truth and reality, and noted through recognizing the realities and voices associated with non-dominant groups, marginalized individuals can alter their social positioning and expose oppressive social constructions of reality and hierarchy.

The notion of standpoints originated in critical literature, through Marx’s advocacy of the difference in viewpoints of the proletariat and the bourgeois (Harding, 2007) and Hegel’s concept of master/slave (Hallstein, 1999). Marx argued that individuals cannot understand the function of class and status from the vantage point of the privileged, because in doing so, individuals further reified dominant ideology (Joseph, 2006). Code (2007) suggested scholars adopting a feminist standpoint epistemology utilize Marx’s commentary on proletariat positioning within bourgeois social hierarchies as a comparison for women’s subordinate roles within patriarchal structures, noting dominant groups naturalization of such practices into dominant ideologies. In seeking to expose the marginalization of groups outside dominant social groups, researchers attempt to create social change through acknowledging a more diverse view of a particular situation. Code (2007) asserted, “diverse standpoints, sometimes united around common issues sometimes not, are possible and indeed necessary” (p. 217).

Researchers (Dougherty, 1999; Hartsock, 1987) have adopted five underlying assumptions of standpoint theory. First, society constructs social hierarchies and classifications in order to distinguish groups of individuals, and the differentiations between social groups both inform and limit reality and knowledge. Second, through hierarchies enacted within society, individuals create a spectrum of privilege, favoring the realities constructed by a dominant group
and minimizing the voices of individuals on the margins of the dominant ideology. Third, individuals within dominant social groups create the overarching truths related to reality, which permeate social classes, prompting the internalization and reifying of dominant ideals by lower social classifications and marginalized groups. Fourth, individuals outside of the dominant group, marginalized by the lack of conformity to prevailing ideology, develop standpoints through understanding the totality of the overarching culture, and understanding the ways in which marginalized viewpoints relate to the dominant in-group. Therefore, standpoints are not innate viewpoints that correlate with in-groups versus out-groups, but rather acquired worldviews based on socially constructed and situational experiences within one’s own culture and the dominant social groups. Scholars (Harding, 2007; Hartsock, 1987) have explained that through research utilizing standpoint theory, researchers have the ability to address notions of political change. Through challenging the naturalizing practices of dominant cultures, researchers can expose the voices of marginalized groups, thus creating a forum for change in the marginalized groups’ status and the lack of voice these groups have within society.

Incorporating these principles as the groundwork for the development of feminist standpoint theory, scholars (Dougherty, 1999; Harding, 2007) have examined the inequalities surrounding dominant and marginalized groups in terms of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Marshall (1993) addressed organizational communication through the use of feminist perspectives on male and female standpoints. She argued that women within organizations operate within traditional patriarchal structures defined though male-dominated patterns of communication. Women, unless conforming to the norm of male oriented communication within the workplace, find themselves marginalized by the dominant male groups based on a lack of female-based communication that addresses the specific viewpoint of women in organizations.
Researchers (Buzzanell, 1994; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000) adopted a similar stance when addressing the viewpoints of women experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace and women’s experiences within organizational cultures respectively. Because patriarchal structures largely define organizational hierarchies, the views of women in relation to organizational practices tend to differ significantly from the dominant male standpoints. While some researchers (Allen, 1998; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000; Marshall, 1993) have applied feminist standpoint theory to the organizational context, others (Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000; Marshall, 1993) have argued that marginalized groups or alternative viewpoints outside of dominant ideologies within organizations should be addressed through continual research related to standpoints.

The underlying tenants of standpoint theory provide a basis for understanding the role of teachers within the education system, particularly in relation to parent-teacher communication. By revising the underlying Marxist conceptualization of dual realities of the proletariat and the bourgeois, researchers can address power differentiations based on employer/employee or supervisor/subordinate positioning.

Through the role changes of both parents and teachers in education as the result of national education reform and parent-involvement movements, teachers have shifted from primary authority figures in terms of classroom-management, curriculum development, and instruction, to facilitators of policies enacted by larger governing bodies and parental demands. More importantly, teachers rarely have a voice in changes related to these areas (Farber, 1991). As several scholars (Dougherty, 1999; Harding, 2007; Hartsock, 1987) have noted, because standpoints are socially and situationally constructed, an individual’s standpoint may change as a result of changes in social or situational context. The rise in parental involvement within
education altered the perceived power differentiation between parents, teachers, and administrators. Whereas teachers circa 1950 retained a large amount of power within public schools as organizations (Morrison, 1978), administrators and parents have shifted the power from the teacher as the provider of a service to parents as “clients” within the education system. This realignment of teachers within the public education system has removed teachers from the dominant group who serve as purveyors to a more marginalized group who have fundamental differences with dominant ideologies (administrators and parents) over the last thirty years. Likewise, through the implementation of new education reform policies via No Child Left Behind and the resulting standardization of curriculum, teachers have also lost their creative control within the classroom, further reducing their role to a facilitator of in-class instruction and communication with parents.

Cullingford (1996) argued that the paradigm shift within the education system from teachers as authority figures to the open door policy, in which school administrators permitted parents to challenge teachers through increased communication and physical presence within schools and classrooms significantly decreased teacher power. Thus, the previous societal assumptions of teachers as members of the dominant group within the education system do not accurately reflect the current positioning of teachers. This shift in beliefs is evident through the conflicting viewpoints of parents and schools versus teachers in relation to parental involvement. Researchers (Burns, 1993; Swap, 1987) have indicated that parents involved in schools reported a greater connection to their children’s education and increased academic achievements in their children, whereas teachers viewed the increased involvement as an increase in stress related to interpersonal work-related relationships. Exploring teacher perceptions of the parent-teacher communication relationship via the notions of standpoint theory may offer different insight
related to the effects of parental involvement that depart from the positive parental involvement reality constructed by the administrators and parents. In addition, the implementation of standpoint theory as a framework for understanding teachers’ perceptions of parent-teacher communication may also indicate a platform for change in the current education system, providing teachers a forum to express alternative realities that may suggest changes needed in the current organizational structure of public schools.

Parent Involvement and Communication within Public Schools

Cullingford (1996) indicated a paradigm shift with regard to parental involvement within the educational system during the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to the movement that encouraged parental participation in schools, many parents perceived a clear distinction between teachers’ and administrators’ roles within the educational system and parental roles within the internal organizational structure (Cullingford; Morrison, 1978; Stafford, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996). The lack of opportunities for formal parental involvement in schools coincided with the dominant perspective of teachers as the central educational figure for students. Administrators in the 1940s and 1950s largely adopted a perspective of learning as a process beginning around the time children enter kindergarten, that could only occur via socialization with other children or through direct teacher instruction within a classroom setting (Morrison, 1978).

However, following further study in the 1960s, educators noted the importance of beginning the educational process during primary stages of child development through head-start programs (Berger, 1991) and home-school partnerships involving parents. Research conducted during this time period reframed the parental role in the education process. Scholars (Burns, 1993; Morrison, 1978; Penn & Childers, 1993; Swap, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996) have established
that children supported by parents via interaction in both the home and school environments exhibit greater potential for academic success. The 1967 release of the Plowden Report further cemented the growing desire for greater parental involvement in school systems and paved the way for educators to reframe organizational structures to include parents as partners within schools (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967; Vincent, 1996). As one of the first governmental reports to legitimize the importance of parent-school interaction, the Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) aimed to reform schools, shifting from a largely school-based education model, to a more cooperative partnership involving parents. The organizational restructuring provided the groundwork for fostering greater parental involvement in schools, and helped the public to conceptualize the changing role of the teacher as new school structures “empowered parents and community members” (Murphy, 1992, p. 12).

Beginning in the 1980s, school administrators actively implemented programs targeting increased parental involvement in K-12 public schools through the use of contact and relationship building strategies, in order to substantiate school-teacher-parent communication and further parental influence in decision-making processes (Berger, 1991; Murphy 1992; Swap, 1987). The previous structure of schools as top-down organizations gave way to a more “consumer-based” approach, with educational institutions functioning as service representatives that interact with the public on a consumer level (Murphy, 1992). During this time frame, parents assumed a more active role in schools via parent-teacher associations (PTA), informal volunteer positions inside and outside of the classroom (Thomas, 1996), and increased parent-teacher communication via conferences and correspondence regarding student progress (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Stafford, 1987). By 1990, parents became a staple figure in schools,
specifically through classroom volunteering and through parent-teacher communication (Strauss, 2006).

Vincent (1996) argued “the legislation and related policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s have given parents power as individual consumers which some parents, mainly members of the professional middle-class, are able to exploit” (p. 41). The introduction of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act in 2001 introduced a new set of rights and responsibilities related to parents and their involvement in their children’s education (National Council of La Raza, 2007; United States Department of Education, n.d.; 2003). In addition to standardizing the frequency and contents of parental notifications, the act also mandates disclosure of teacher qualifications, school accreditation status, and the development of specific parent involvement strategies (United States Department of Education, n.d.). NCLB encouraged parents previously uninvolved in their children’s education to maintain consistent communication with teachers, and encouraged for parents already involved in schools to increase their level of contact with teachers. While teachers and administrators working at schools in low socio-economic areas experienced greater difficulty engaging parents in the classroom and via extra-curricular meetings and events despite the implementation of NCLB, researchers (Hill et al., 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001) have indicated that greater parent involvement occurred in schools with higher socio-economic populations. This finding gains increasing importance with the rise of standardized testing and specific benchmarks placed on K-12 students (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004). Given increased parental involvement in higher socio-economic schools, and links between student achievement and parental involvement, the implementation of academic-based benchmarks and standardized testing requirements may further increase involvement.
Schools across the country now receive funding and rankings based on standardized test scores and, in turn, they place greater emphasis on standardizing curriculum within school districts and promoting parents as partners in schools. Researchers (Sunderman et al., 2004) argued that the rewards-based approach to meeting benchmark standards may unfairly place blame on teachers for low test scores and school shortcomings. Sunderman et al. further indicated teacher frustration with the additional constraints on their roles as educators through NCLB stating, “Teachers confirm that the NCLB accountability system [of standardized testing] is influencing the instructional and curricular practices of teachers, but it is producing unintended and possibly negative consequences” (pp. 3-4). Although the government utilized the act to encourage a uniform education for children across all socioeconomic backgrounds, they also sent a distinct message regarding the communication teachers and schools must maintain with parents. Thus, NCLB reaffirmed the shift in parents’ and teachers’ roles within school systems, and highlighted the customer service relationship between schools and parents. With the increase in parental involvement in K-12 schools, teachers have experienced greater interpersonal interaction, and in turn must manage emotions and personal feelings in order to reflect work-related standards for professional behavior.

Emotional Labor

Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as “the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (p. 7). She explained emotional labor encompasses the emotional regulation associated with a job, required for successful completion of work-related tasks. Researchers (Adelmann 1995; Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2008) have further defined the term as a concept
associated with a paid position and “work which goes beyond cognitive, physical, or mechanical skills but is required for job completion” (p. 3). Furthermore, Morris and Feldman (1996) incorporated the notion of organizationally desired emotion as a factor influencing emotion regulation. Employee use of emotional labor directly correlates with the need to manage emotions in regards to interpersonal interactions with customers or clients, thus human service workers and customer service agents routinely engage in emotion regulation within the workplace (Adelmann, 1995). Scholars (Adelmann, 1995; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1979; 1983) have argued that employees engage in emotional labor for a number of reasons including: maintaining positive customer relations, catering to emotional demands related to an organizational role, complying with employer expectations, and maintaining social desirability. Through interactions with customers or clients, employees project a personal and organizational image to the public. Researchers (Hargreaves, 1998; Hochschild, 1983; Näring, Briët, & Borwers, 2006; Sutton, 2004) have examined the prevalence of emotional labor among teachers, and have indicated that the need to manage emotions related to workplace demands for client interactions (teacher-student, teacher-parent, and teacher-administrator).

In order to maintain expectations associated with workplace norms, job descriptions, or general societal expectations with regard to customer-service, employers utilize implicit or explicit display and feeling rules related to emotional labor in order to control employee responses and behaviors (Adelmann, 1995; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000). Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) stated, “These display rules refer to the degree to which showing and hiding emotions is seen as an expected part of employee performance” (p. 21). Additionally, employer demands for organizationally appropriate displays of emotions removes
employee control over outward personal expressions. The notion of control related to emotional labor distinctly defines emotional labor, specifically with regard to the amount of agency an employee perceives related to altering or monitoring emotions (Guy et al., 2008). Employees within human service industries do not choose to employ emotional labor based on personal beliefs or desires, rather employers require a certain level of emotional labor based on the quantity and quality of client interaction related to jobs. Thus, employees engage in emotion work, or altering of emotions to fit a specific situation, of their own free will, independent of job-related demands (Hochschild, 1979; Guy et al.).

Employees utilize two predominant strategies when managing emotions within the workplace: surface acting and deep acting (Grandey, 2000; Guy et al., 2008; Hochschild, 1979; Hochschild, 1983). Through the implementation of surface acting, employees project emotions that they do not genuinely believe in or feel. For example, individuals may display calmness while angry, or maintain a positive nonverbal demeanor through smiling and posture while sad or unsure. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) stated, “such discrepancies may occur because various factors impede the agent from feeling the emotions that he or she wishes to display” (p. 93). In instances where company policy requires the adoption of “the customer’s always right” mantra, management may not approve of employee displays of hostility or frustration. Employees must then feign alternative, socially or organizationally desired expressions of emotions. According to Hochschild (1983), individuals often repress personal feelings related to expressions or utilize imaginative strategies to alter surface-level displays of emotion. Employees may also utilize deep acting to convey appropriate work-related emotional displays, which consists of employees altering personal feelings in order to align their beliefs with the emotional state employers require in relationship to organizational positions (Ashforth & Humphrey, Grandey, 2000).
Several researchers (Adelmann, 1995; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Kruml & Geddes, 2000; Leidner, 1999; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Steinberg & Figart, 1999) have studied the effects of emotional labor on employees, specifically with regard to employee job perceptions and the onset of stress and burnout. Because of the customer-oriented nature of their careers, employees within human service professions reported experiencing more frequent and lengthy interactions with clients, thus requiring greater amounts of emotional regulation (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Pugliesi (1999) argued that employees continually engaging in self-directed and other-directed emotional labor, thus managing personal feelings and outward expression of feelings toward others, indicated a lack of control over work-related tasks and interactions, ultimately leading to an overall feeling of distress. The continual suppression of personal feelings based on professional standards related to emotional expression contributes to employees’ perceptions of additional stress from shifting personal and professional roles. Additionally, even employees in jobs with positively perceived effects of emotional labor as a precursor for stress and emotional dissonance among workers (Adelmann, 1995; Steinberg & Figart, 1999). Schaubroeck and Jones (2000) found similar results, and noted that the demands of emotional labor in addition to existing workplace stressors may cause employees to exhibit physical symptoms of stress and burnout.

Guy et al. (2008) indicated the increasing importance of emotional labor among teachers. Through continual implementation of emotional labor in the workplace in order to manage interpersonal interactions and communication, human service workers, particularly teachers, develop a higher propensity for stress and burnout as a result of the additional effort required to complete their roles within organizations successfully. Teachers, because of the constant
Teacher Stress and Burnout

Scholars (Carlyle & Woods, 2002; Dunham, 1992; Dworkin, 1987; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 1998; Miller et al., 1988; Ray & Miller, 1991; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Saellis, & Parker, 2000) have identified teachers as more susceptible to the effects of stress and burnout than other occupations, due in part to the multi-faceted pressures present in a teacher’s daily routine as nurturers, instructors, and facilitators of mandated curriculum. This condition is further compounded by the human service worker categorization of teachers, requiring frequent and lengthy interpersonal contact and communication. Researchers (Hodge, Jupp, & Taylor, 1994; Wilhelm et al., 2000) have indicated that teachers have reported feeling more stress than other human service workers. McCarthy, Kissen, Yadley, Wood and Lambert (2005) explained, “teacher stress may be seen as the perception of an imbalance between demands at school and the resources teachers have for coping with them” (p. 179). With the shift in the role of the teacher from the central figure in the education process, to a peripheral position in support of administrative policies and parent intervention, teachers assume the role of educator/policy facilitator, and mediator for student and family communication (Dunham, 1992). In addition to the shifting roles within the education system, teachers often manage personal stresses, including home-life demands, in addition to the stresses associated with multiple roles in the workplace (Wilhelm et al., 2000). Teacher stress is brought on through negative affect resulting from professional pressures and may result in anger, depression, and loss of interest in the field of education (Geving, 2007).
Researchers (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005; Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey, & Bassler, 1988; Buunk et al., 2007; Dunham, 1992; Ray & Miller, 1991; Walsh, 1998) have examined several individual and organizational factors contributing to teacher stress and burnout. Brissie et al. (1988) indicated that the largest organizational contributor to teacher stress and burnout related to organizational structure and flexibility. These factors include: perceived ineffectual communication (Brown & Ralph, 1998), overwhelming demands on personal and professional time (Haberman, 2005; Walsh, 1998), unmanageable interpersonal relationships with parents, students, and coworkers (Buunk et al.; Dunham, 1992; Wilhelm et al., 2000), increase in workload (Dunham, 1992; Walsh, 1998), and lack of support and reciprocity (Dunham, 1992; Ray & Miller, 1991; van Horn et al., 1999; Yong & Yue, 2007). Teachers experiencing stress from one or more of these factors are likely to experience symptoms of burnout, resulting in increased susceptibility to additional stressors.

While the various organizational predictors of discontent exacerbate the progression of stress and burnout, researchers report conflicting findings related to the emphasis on specific organizational contributors to burnout, and statistical data related to teacher perceptions of stressors. Teachers, reporting an overall feeling of lack of time, must manage work-related interpersonal relationships inside and out of the classroom, which increases the amount of attention they devote to ingoing and outgoing communication (Dunham, 1992). Scholars (Brown & Ralph, 1998) stated, “Staff frequently perceive a divide between ‘them’ [non-teachers] and ‘us’ [teachers] and report feelings of being devalued, ignored and poorly motivated” (p. 48). With pre-existing demands on K-12 teachers to manage administrative work within schools and responsibilities to instruct students, the increased workload in facilitating communication with parents further compounds stresses traditionally associated with the teaching profession. The
National Center for Education Statistics (2001) affirmed the depth and breadth of information that teachers and schools communicate with parents, and provided evidence for different perceptions between schools/teachers and parents related to communication between the two parties. Roughly 99% of school administrators and teachers reported that school officials routinely communicated information regarding student progress, grade placement, and standardized test results to parents. However, only 57 percent of parents participating in the survey stated they received communication from their children’s schools and teachers regarding their children in each of the three areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The perceived gap between communicative interactions may increase teachers stress levels, especially when managing interpersonal communication regarding perceptual differences. Although several researchers (Burns, 1993; Cullingford, 1996; Morrison, 1978; Penn & Childers, 1993; Swap, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996) have addressed the educational movement to encourage parental involvement in K-12 schools, no researchers have studied the effect of this increase, and the increase in communication that results, on teachers’ perceptions of stress and burnout. In addition to inconsistent communication as an organizational burnout factor, MetLife (2005) found that teachers experienced a disconnect between their requests for structured parental involvement (attendance at parent-teacher conferences, homework help for students, and participation as field-trip chaperones) and actual parental involvement in schools. Moreover, 73 percent of teachers surveyed stated that parents viewed them as adversaries. However, researchers addressing teacher stress and burnout have failed to investigate the apparent teacher discontent as a result of increased parent-teacher communication.

Previous researchers have not addressed the issues teachers view as primary contributors to burnout, communication, and interpersonal interaction. Haberman (2000), who argued the
importance of teacher perceptions when addressing stress and burnout, claimed:

These findings also support the contention that the conditions of work in schools do not exist independently but must be strained through the perceptions and value systems of the teachers before they become either causes of teacher burnout or simple conditions that teachers can cope with or ignore. (p. 159)

Jepson and Forrest (2006) argued personal qualities and personality characteristics also contribute to the onset of teacher stress and burnout. Researchers (Brown & Ralph, 1998; Jepson & Forrest) have indicated that teachers with high personal work standards and Type-A personalities demonstrated a tendency to perceive stress more often than teachers who do not exhibit these qualities. Likewise, Cano-García, Padilla-Muñoz, and Carrasco-Ortiz (2006) found teachers exhibiting neurotic behaviors indicated higher levels of burnout specifically related to emotional exhaustion and depletion of personal and professional fulfillment. Teven (2007) focused on similar personality factors (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience) and confirmed the relationship between teacher personality, caring, and burnout. In addition to personality classifications, Haberman (2000) noted the frequent use of demographic information to predict teacher stress and burnout, and stated women experience more stress than men in the teaching profession. While these researchers have indicated a link between personal factors and teacher stress, the scholars depicted Type-A personalities and neurotic behaviors as inherent qualities of individuals rather than possible work-related personality developments. Similarly, emotional labor researchers (Hargreaves, 1998; Sutton, 2004) have indicated that human service workers possess a passion for the service profession, and the personality related characteristics may serve as a function of completing a given role or task to the best of an employee’s capabilities. Focusing on individual characteristics as a cause rather than an effect of work-related stress and burnout furthers the notion that teachers are the cause of or contributors to several of the stressors they experience.
rather than a group continually burned out and shifted to the margins of the education system by the effects of education reform and role shifts.

If stress and burnout are not addressed teachers are likely to withdraw from social relationships and suffer a loss in overall classroom effectiveness (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Alternately, teachers capable of identifying causes of stress and applying positive coping strategies are likely to attain higher levels of job satisfaction and individual perceptions of professional performance. Howard and Johnson (2004) reported teachers frequently utilized depersonalization, seeking social support from co-workers, and personal resiliency to circumvent the onset of burnout. In addition to strategies implemented within the workplace, Wilhelm et al. (2000) explored teacher use of exit strategies through leaving the teaching profession as a response to work-related stress and burnout. Many teachers indicated leaving the teaching profession in response to decreased job satisfaction, a disconnect between personal and employer expectations, and interpersonal pressures (co-workers or other personal contacts). They also stated exit strategies appear most prevalent among teachers during their first 5 years on the job. This statistic parallels the experiences of a number of marginalized groups who exit adverse situations because they perceive they do not have the voice to instigate change. Botwinik (2007) also addressed teacher stress from a coping perspective, through the implementation of lifestyle changes; however a majority of the suggestions for teachers to manage stress placed the responsibility on teachers to self-regulate work stresses, and shifted the emphasis from a shared organization-employee partnership, to an employee-centered issue (Botwinik, 2007). This focus parallels the shift in the educational system, altering the role of the teacher from the primary authority within the classroom, to a more marginalized role in the education process. In addition, scholars focusing on coping strategies failed to take into account the teachers’ perspectives in the
stress and coping process, utilizing instead a predictive lens for stress and burnout management. As an increasing number of teachers utilize exit strategies as a coping mechanism, evident by the 16.8 percent turnover rate for teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), scholars need to place greater emphasis on providing a voice for teachers to explain their work-related experiences of stress and burnout in order to address best practices for teacher coping mechanisms.

The continuing marginalization of teachers combined with the lack of extensive research related to parent-teacher communication and the effects of increased communicative interaction between the two parties on teachers’ perceptions of their jobs, their stress/burnout levels, and considerations of leaving the profession, has lead me to propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What do K-12 teachers’ narratives of memorable interactions with parents reveal about their perceived positions within the educational system?

RQ2: What do K-12 teachers’ narratives of memorable interactions with parents reveal about the process of emotional labor communication?

RQ3: What do K-12 teachers’ narratives of memorable interactions with parents reveal about outcomes stemming from parent-teacher communication?
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

In order to better understand the attitudes and opinions of teachers with regard to parent-teacher communication, I focused on K-12 teachers in a school district in a major city in north Texas. Through a series of on-site interviews and focus groups, I gained further insight into teacher positioning within the school system, emotional labor, and stress as related to parent-teacher communication. In the following section, I describe the participants, recruitment, data collection procedures, data analysis, and verification for the study.

Participants

Thirty participants were recruited for this study. Participants for the study included 25 females and 5 males, ranging from 24 to 55 years of age, with a mean age of 38.33. Regarding ethnicity, 29 (96.77%) participants self-identified as Caucasian, and one (3.33%) participant identified as Hispanic. Participants in the study accurately reflected the ethnicity demographics within the school district. According to the International Curriculum Management Audit Center (2005) 95.9% of teachers in the school district reported their ethnicity as white, 2.9% Hispanic, 0.6% African American, 0.4% Asian, and 0.2% Native American. Length of time teaching ranged from 1.5 to 25 years, with an average of 8.68 years of experience. With regard to grade level, teachers reported their status as: 46.67% fifth grade teachers, 20% sixth grade teachers, 10% fifth and sixth grade teachers, 10% seventh grade teachers, 3.33% eighth grade teachers, and 10% seventh and eighth grade teachers. Additionally, teachers reported on their previous grade level experience as follows: 16.67% taught kindergarten, 20% taught first grade, 13.33% taught second grade, 23.33% taught third grade, 23.33% taught fourth grade, 76.67% taught fifth
grade, 60% taught sixth grade, 43.33% taught seventh grade, 40% taught eighth grade, 10% taught ninth grade, 13.33% taught tenth grade, 13.33% taught eleventh grade, and 16.67% taught twelfth grade. Two teachers (6.66%) reported previous experience teaching special education, and four teachers (13.33%) previously taught pre-kindergarten. In order to qualify as a participant for the study, teachers had to: hold a professional teaching position kindergarten through twelfth grade (this excludes para-professional positions, e.g. teacher’s aides), work in a middle to upper-class socio-economic public school, and have taught for at least one full school year. The time stipulation allowed for data to be obtained from teachers fully immersed within the organizational culture of schools, and provided a more accurate view of teaching in terms of school events, testing/accreditation processes, and fluctuating workload.

Recruitment

Researchers (Hill et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; Revicki, 1981) have indicated that voluntary parental involvement increases among parents in middle and upper-class socioeconomic statuses; thus the impact of increased parental communication and involvement with teachers may be best understood through interviews with teachers at public schools falling within these socio-economic backgrounds. The United States Census Bureau (2001) defined the mean middle, upper-middle, and upper class income range for households as $42,629, $66,839, and $145,970 respectively. School districts considered for the project were located in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex and fell within the average household income range of $42,629 to $145,970.

Following the collection of socio-economic data on school districts in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex area, I contacted principals from local schools via email. The emails contained
information regarding the scope of the project, and requested informational interviews with principals and administrative staff in order to gain access to the schools as interview sites and to gain permission to recruit participants for the study. Schools were selected based on the positive responses from principals, which indicated their willingness to comply with access and data collection needs. For the purposes of this project, I met with two principals at schools with between 90 and 97 employees, and provided letters of consent for access to the site and cooperation with the study. The North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) (2000) indicated the mean household income for schools within the chosen district as $81,873, and the average household incomes of families of the schools within the zip code of the two participating schools as $62,613 (www.publicschoolreview.com).

At School 1, an intermediate school, I recruited participants through the use of snowball sampling, as friends and family teaching in the school provided names and email addresses of willing participants. Additionally, the principal announced the study during a series of faculty meetings and provided information based on Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent and a copy of the interview and focus group protocols, which detailed the scope, requirements, and level of participant involvement in data collection. The principal also highlighted the study’s need for teachers with memorable communication experiences with parents, and indicated that teachers needed to meet participant criteria for involvement. In addition, I spent two full days at the site to introduce the study, answer participant questions, and recruit participants.

Participants from School 2, a middle school, were recruited through the help of the school’s administrative staff. I set up an informational interview with the principal of the school and the assistant principal staff. Following discussion of IRB informed consent information, the scope of the project, and the focus group and interview protocol, the principal agreed to site
access and offered to help establish contacts with participants in order to set up interviews. The assistant principals printed copies of all teacher schedules over the course of a seven-period school day, and chose between seven and nine teachers, at random, to participate in the interview process. One assistant principal emailed selected teachers about the interview process and scheduled blocks of times to meet for back-to-back on-site interviews, and another staff member followed up with participants during the interview day as a reminder of interview appointments.

Data Collection Procedures

To address teachers’ standpoints of parent-teacher communication, I conducted audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews with thirty (N=30) K-12 teachers at two public schools within middle to upper class socio-economic areas in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. I conducted 25 one-on-one interviews, and one focus group that consisted of five participants. While researchers (Hoepfl, 1997; Sandelowski, 1995) have not defined a preferred number of interviews required for qualitative research designs, they proposed that between 10 and 50 interviews provide sufficient data. All interviews and the focus group were conducted on-site at the two schools. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested interviews are especially valuable for understanding participants experiences and perspectives through stories and explanations, eliciting participants’ language forms, learning about past events, and learning about experiences that researchers cannot learn about on their own. Lindlof and Taylor also indicated the use of focus groups in the data collection process can “vivify the group norms and sensemaking that occur naturally in the participant’s world” (p.182). All preliminary meetings, interviews, and focus group sessions were conducted over the span of two months.
At School 1, interviews were conducted in teachers’ classrooms during teacher’s co-
curriculum or planning periods and after school over the course of four weeks. Interviews at
School 2 were conducted in the school’s library during teacher’s planning and conference
periods over the course of one school day. Teachers interviewed at the first school appeared
comfortable discussing their opinions within their own classrooms, and the library at School 2
provided a quiet, secluded setting, free from planning-related distractions. These locations met
Lindlof and Taylor’s (2002) description for an appropriate interview context: the need for
privacy, comfort, and convenience for participants. The focus group took place in the classroom
of one of the participants, and other participants agreed that the site served as the most central
meeting locale. This set-up allowed the teachers to close the classroom door in order to ensure
privacy during the session.

Prior to the start of each one-on-one, face-to-face interview and the focus group, I
detailed the basis of the study, purposes of the participants’ participation, reviewed foreseeable
risks related to the project, and confidentiality, and then asked participants to sign an IRB
reviewed informed consent form. Additionally, I asked the participants for their consent to
audio-record interviews and the focus group session, as obtaining permission allowed
interviewees to feel more comfortable with the setting and the interviewer and helped capture
participants’ responses verbatim (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Tape-recorded
interviews began with basic demographic information consisting of: age, sex, ethnicity, number
of years taught, grade levels taught, and current grade taught. The interview and focus group
protocols (see Appendix A and B) consisted of five open-ended, nondirective questions related to
teachers’ memorable experiences with parent-teacher communication, the impact of parent-
teacher communication on teachers’ perceptions of their jobs, metaphors used to describe parent-
teach communication the effects of technology on parent-teacher communication, as well as past and present expectations of parent-teacher communication. The open-ended questions allowed participants to openly convey their attitudes and opinions related to parent teacher communication (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002); I included the metaphor question based on Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts’ (2006) finding that metaphors allow for human service workers to describe difficult or hurtful aspects of their jobs. Interviews lasted between 10 and 20 minutes and the focus group session lasted 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviewing process, I transcribed all of the interview and focus group recordings, and combined them into a single data set. The data yielded 120 double-spaced pages of transcriptions. Creswell’s (2007) description of a phenomenological data analysis and standpoint theory provided a tentative structure to facilitate the review of transcripts and codes. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) described the phenomenological method of interpretation as a strategy to “interpret constructs of communicative experience” and indicated the usefulness of this approach when adopting a critical theoretical perspective (p. 237). The author and another communication studies scholar read through the transcripts during the initial review process to become acclimated with the data. Following the initial read through, both researchers read through the data again individually and made notes in the margins of the transcripts regarding initial codes and categories. To complete this process, the scholars utilized horizontalization to “identify significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Following the initial review, the researchers worked in tandem to identify individually marked themes and concepts and
grouped together like-descriptions and codes based on similarity in order to create clusters of meaning related to the parent-teacher communication experiences. Utilizing the three research questions as a guiding framework for coding, the researchers read through each line of data, discussed the meaning of each statement and how each line of data related to the research questions, and reached a discussion regarding which category the data best exemplified. Upon reaching a consensus, the authors copied and pasted the selected data into a Microsoft Word document labeled with the category title. A new Word document was created for each theme, which resulted in 55 individual Word documents.

Validation

In order to verify data analysis procedures, I utilized three approaches to ensure validity: member checking, presenting viewpoints contrary to dominant themes, and spending prolonged time in the field (Creswell, 2007, 2008). To conduct the member check, I randomly selected three participants from the study and met with them for 25 minutes at the end of a school day one week after the data analysis process to review major themes. Following the presentation of the categories and themes, I provided the participants with an opportunity to provide feedback about their perceptions of accuracy. The three participants identified with the descriptions of codes and themes, and indicated the similarities between the data and their experiences with parent-teacher communication. While researchers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) noted the possibility of participants projecting their biases onto the data set during the member check process, they stated that participants provide insight into the accuracy of their thoughts, opinions, and experiences.

Throughout the results section, participant viewpoints, both positive and negative, are included in the descriptions of categories and themes. While the majority of participants reported
negative experiences, seven of the 30 interviews contained positive experiences related to parent-teacher communication. Many of the descriptions utilized within the study reflect negative opinions and perceptions of parent-teacher communication, as 23 of the 30 participants described negative experiences, however, positive anecdotes and viewpoints are included in order to highlight the contrary standpoints of the other participants (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) stated that while data tends to support derived themes, providing opposing or conflicting opinions ensures a realistic report of data and helps to build study credibility.

In order to conduct the study, I spent a significant amount of time in the field at participating schools. Through preliminary meetings with principals and administrators, I was able to tour the schools and become acclimated to the environment. Additionally, I maintained contact with the schools and teachers over a two-month period in order to complete data collection. During this time period I built rapport with faculty and staff, which allowed for open communication and a working knowledge of both the school district and the individual schools. Creswell (2008) highlighted the importance of spending time in the field and indicated “in this way, the researcher develops an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey detail about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account” (p. 192).
The analysis of interview and focus group transcripts yielded 55 preliminary categories. These categorizations, developed through the initial review process, were condensed into nine themes that addressed the three research questions. In order to synthesize the data into more concise themes, the researchers deleted some categories because of the lack of relevance to the research questions and collapsed other categories based on similar participant responses. In support of research question one (RQ1), three themes emerged: a paradigm shift in education, accountability for student behavior and progress, and depleting teacher power. In support of research question two (RQ2), three themes emerged: complying with job-related expectations, maintaining “positive” parent-teacher communication, and emotional dissonance. In support of research question three (RQ3), three themes emerged: workload, role conflict/ambiguity, and factors and outcomes related to stress and burnout. In this section, I will define each of the nine themes, explain the relevance of each theme to the respective research question, and detail participant responses within the themes. All names and references to school and district affiliations have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and ensure confidentiality.

Research Question 1

Research Question (RQ) 1 asked, “What do K-12 teachers’ narratives of memorable interactions with parents reveal about their perceived positions within the educational system?” Three themes emerged in relation to this research question: a paradigm shift in the educational system, accountability for student behavior and progress, and depleting teacher power. The
theme, labeled “paradigm shift in educational system” includes 19 participant responses and refers to examples of shifting communication trends related to parent-teacher communication. The “accountability for student behavior and progress” theme is elucidated by 52 participant responses, and encompassed the struggle to define accountability for student progress, behavior, and attitudes between teachers and parents. The third theme, depleting teacher power, is comprised of 43 participant responses. This section is largely defined by parent and administrator initiatives and behaviors which ultimately deplete teachers’ power including discrediting teachers, jumping the chain of command, verbal aggression, and unrealistic technology expectations.

*Paradigm shift in the educational system.* One theme that emerged in support of RQ1 detailed participant observations of changes in the structure of the educational system. Researchers (Cullingford, 1996; Murphy, 1992; NEA, 2007; Strauss, 2006; Thomas, 1996) have described increased parental involvement within the school system, and have indicated teachers’ frustrations with the newfound roles in the parent, teacher, and administrator partnership (MetLife, 2005). Through their narratives regarding experiences managing parent-teacher communication, teachers revealed a transformation of their positions, relative to power relations, within the education system. In chronicling the increase in parent involvement in schools and the altered role of teachers, participants largely commented on the rise of the helicopter parent. As defined by researchers (Carroll, 2005; Gibbs, 2005; Jayson, 2007; Landau, 2008; Strauss, 2006) helicopter parents display a level of over-involvement in the education of their children in kindergarten through twelfth grade. In addition, the NEA (2007) identified helicopter parents as potentially intimidating and threatening in their interactions with teachers. Twelve study participants identified this phenomenon and also noted that parents maintain a significant amount
of control within school districts. Highlighting the newfound roles that parents occupy, which ultimately allow them a greater amount of sway in decision making processes, one teacher recalled parental involvement over the showing of the 2009 presidential inauguration. She stated:

Participant: Parents in this district have a lot of pull though. Like with the election, did you hear about the election?

Interviewer: No.

Participant: So we weren’t supposed to be allowed to watch the inauguration during school. The district sends out this email, not allowed to do it. I was talking with a friend of mine at the school board about the situation, and he said not 2 hours after they had posted that to the website, they were flooded with parent phone calls and emails asking “How can you do this?” or “My child will be watching this.” Just crazy. Sure enough, the school district reversed their original decision based on parent wishes. One minute you’ve made a choice, and the next minute parents are demanding you do things their way, and they get their way. It happens all the time, whether people want to talk about it or not. That’s something new teachers in this area need to know, they [parents] run the show.

Other teachers also noted the lengths parents go to in order to maintain a sense of control over the communication with teachers and the education of their children. These accounts of parental over-involvement appear consistent with Gibbs’ (2005) discussion of helicopter parents. In order to maintain a sense of control and power within school systems, helicopter parents oftentimes struggle with teachers over the desire for influence in classroom involvement and management. When explaining the heightened involvement of parents in schools, one interviewee described parental intrusions within the classroom setting. She commented:

You’ve got parents who want to sit in your room or know why you’re doing everything that you’re doing and can’t explain it if they’re not a teacher because they won’t get what you’re doing and why you’re doing it.

Another teacher discussed the more frequent role of parent volunteers in the classroom. Although researchers (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967; Hara & Burke, 1998; Penn & Childers, 1993; Swap, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996) have detailed the positive impact of parental
involvement in schools, participants addressed the problems that arise when parents become too involved in the classroom. One teacher indicated:

One thing they [teachers] need to know is that if they’re blessed to be in a community with parent volunteers, if you have a parent that you start to have some difficulty communicating with, it can become a conflict of interest and the parent can become an enemy. Some things, then they’re there to nitpick, and to kind of, and then they want to talk about the other kids in the classroom.

For many teachers, a moderate level of involvement within the classroom may prove beneficial to students. For example, one participant in the present study said, “When the parents respond to what you ask of them to help their children and if they respond to that by just being willing to do anything and everything that you’d think would be helpful, that’s really rewarding.” However, the current trend of over-involvement and helicopter parents has too often created a strain on traditional home-school boundaries and responsibility expectations. A teacher commented, “In the last five or six years especially, um, that it seems like parents aren’t expecting what they need to be expecting out of their children and expecting much more from the schools and the teachers.” Another interview participant indicated, “Sometimes parent push the boundaries a little too much, but we’re expected to just do our jobs.” Researchers (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996) have noted the open-door policy schools administrators have adopted, and teachers’ narratives consistently support the consumer-based model that parent-teacher interaction accommodates. Under this organizational restructuring from teachers as authoritative figures (Morrison, 1978) to parents adopting a more hands-on approach equivalent in power to teachers, the schools systems have shifted the educational model to a “consumer based” approach (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996), in which parents exert greater control over school policies and teacher power.
In order to further illustrate the shift in teacher autonomy with regard to classroom policy, discipline, and communication, five narratives included teachers’ experiences growing up in the school system and their experiences as parents with school-age children as anchors for comparing present experiences. One participant stated:

It wasn’t like this when I was in school, and I’m not that old, this is only my 13\textsuperscript{th} year to teach. But when I was in school, you didn’t have, teachers ran the classrooms, and if you went to the office it was a big deal. You were punished and you never wanted to go to the office, and the parents, they were usually informed of what happened, but you had parents that backed up the decision. They didn’t come try to bail you out. Our students, now they run home saying, ‘Oh, the teacher is picking on me, she doesn’t like me.’ It’s nothing like I thought it would be.

During an interview session, one teacher commented on the apparent shift in values and expectations of children over the course of three decades. She stated, “My generation grew up when we went to school, I was taught by my parents to value education and respect. Also, it’s like if you got in trouble in school, you got it ten times worse at home.” Additionally, three teachers commented on the differences in parent-teacher communication and interaction through their experiences raising children within the educational system. Citing shifts in communication trends, an interviewee stated, “I expected it \[communication with parents\] to be what it was for me as a parent. Once a grading period – good luck with that.” She continued and explained:

Um, as a parent myself, when my children were in school my communication was a parent conference or if there was a problem a note home, both of those very infrequent. Contact between parent and school probably happened once a grading period or once a semester. Here, we’re expected to do the weekly newsletter and at the beginning of school we had to hold conferences with every single parent.

Overall, 19 participant responses indicated a disconnect between previous experiences and expectations and the reality of the current state of parent-teacher communication in the educational system. As school and district administrators, through the shift in the education system, continue to view parents as consumers or clients, especially in middle to upper class
districts (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996), the standpoints of teachers appear impacted by the change. Teachers, departing from overarching rhetoric within school systems, oftentimes discussed the negative aspects of parent-teacher communication as a result of shifts in the educational system.

Researchers (Dougherty, 1999; Hartsock, 1987) have indicated that individuals’ standpoints largely hinge on socially constructed perceptions. As a result, the standpoints adopted by teachers regarding perceptions of their positions within schools systems are significantly impacted by social and contextual factors, including the realignment of the educational system to incorporate parents further. This shift caused many teachers to reconceptualize their roles within the education system (Cullingford, 1996), and has further differentiated the standpoints of the dominant ideology of positive parental involvement from teachers’ standpoints. One participant commented, “It’s [teachers’ roles] totally changed and that’s what’s frustrating. We don’t have a lot of power, well, I don’t know that’s not the word, maybe control?” Another teacher, indicating the effects of parental influence within school districts, explained, “This is a parent driven district, oh yes. Once you know parent expectations, you’re shifting things around to work, like clay, or making a square piece fit in a round hole.” These sentiments are consistant with Hartsock’s (1987) conceptualization of different standpoints as by-products of the dual-realities created through social hierarchy and status. As parents continue to adopt more dominant roles within the educational system, their control allows for the creation of realities for non-dominant or marginalized groups. Such is the case with teachers. Because of the changes in power and status between parents and teachers, participants indicated feelings of helplessness and lack of control with regard to their positioning within the academic hierarchy.
Accountability for student behavior and progress. The second theme that emerged in support of RQ1 encompassed notions of accountability among parents and teachers. Through this theme, two predominant perspectives emerged: shifting responsibility from parents/children to teachers, and shifting responsibility from teachers to parents/children. Teachers expressed parent-teacher tensions related to accountability for children’s academic and behavioral issues in the classroom. Teachers reported an overwhelming feeling of responsibility for parent and child actions, and through 43 responses, participants indicated their perceptions of disproportionate blame for student (mis)behavior and academic progress. In response to the continual blame for students’ actions, teachers also described a need to shift responsibility for student progress and behavior to parents and children.

A common theme across the 43 responses included deferring blame from children to teachers for discipline issues. One participant’s comments encompassed the sentiments of many. She stated, “I think parents these days are too quick to, um, blame other people for their children or what their children do.” An interview participant provided a similar account of the shift in responsibility and indicated, “The expectations aren’t placed on the students, so it’s hard for, sometimes it’s hard as a teacher if you don’t feel like you have that back-up coming.” Another teacher provided similar commentary and described the extent to which children escape blame for their own actions. She noted:

Nowadays, it’s always, it doesn’t matter, the kids can be bad, they can throw things, they can hit other people, um, we even had one kid this year bring a knife to school and the mom was just, how dare us get onto them, I mean they’re 10 and 11. It’s crazy their logic, a lot of them. It’s always, it’s never the kids’ fault, it’s always the teacher’s fault and we’re out to get them, yet you spend all this time trying to find ways to help their kids.
Misbehavior appeared as a common tension between parents and teachers, and one interviewee highlighted the effects of breaking up a verbal altercation among students. The teacher recalled:

Well, two boys were arguing and calling each other names, pretty mean names, and um, those parents called me upset saying I handled their kids wrong – their student wrong and was too nice to the other student. I disciplined them the same way and both parents were very upset saying I was being very unfair to those boys.

Another participant discussed the parent-teacher communication she experienced when calling a parent to discuss a student’s truancy. Following an incident of verbal aggression when talking to the mother, the parent proceeded to inform the teacher that the school’s faculty directly impacted her child’s behavior. The participant described the communicative interaction, “All of her kid’s teachers were terrible this year, and her kid didn’t like school. No wonder she doesn’t want to go to class and this and that.” Through the use of teachers as scapegoats, parents and children attempt to avoid addressing personal fault in discipline situations. One teacher, recounting issues with parent involvement in the classroom, described handling a situation with a parent volunteer. She commented, “Her child was having some behavior problems and she wanted to blame other kids in the classroom, or me, and she didn’t want to take responsibility.”

Participants also indicated teachers are b for students’ academic progress and achievement, and noted the lack of parent accountability for students’ work. One teacher discussed issues with retaining a child based on reading abilities, and described the lack of progress made throughout the course of the school year. Through retention, school officials require students to repeat their current grade level due to unsatisfactory academic performance. She explained, “The parents were, um, very opposed to him being retained. Felt at that point they were blaming me for the lack of progress.” Another participant further elaborated on issues related to student progress, and explained her perceptions of predominantly negative parent-
teacher communication due to teacher blame. When addressing academic issues she emphasized parental responses, “‘What are you doing to help my kid pass, because he’s not passing and it’s your fault.’” She continued, “It’s not the students’ fault, it’s not the parents’ fault, it’s not how fast our curriculum is going, it’s what are you doing to help my kid.” Dworkin (1987) confirmed the tendency for parents to blame teachers for teacher lack of control over larger decision making processes that influence curriculum and classroom management. Other parents shift responsibility to teachers through pressuring teachers to accommodate individual students. An interview participant stated:

Workwise, it’s constant, parents calling up wanting, I call it spoon-feeding. You know, ‘Can you give them another paper, can you give them more time, make sure that you call me everyday when he doesn’t do his homework.’

Following the recollection of instances related to teacher blame, several teachers reflected on the issues related to student and parent accountability. One participant stated:

I feel like parents are setting their kids up for things. They don’t give them those opportunities to be responsible and accountable. We as teachers end up being more accountable for what they didn’t do than what the kids are.

Another teacher, while highlighting the benefits of parent-teacher communication, commented on the problems related to shifting responsibility from children. She explained:

It’s a good thing to have the frequent communication, sometimes it does hinder the kids because they become so reliant on having that agenda sent to them every week of exactly what’s supposed to happen that the responsibility is taken away from them. And um, I think it does hurt them in terms of becoming more responsible and self-sufficient.

While participants commented on the issues related to shifting responsibility for parent and child issues to teachers, they also provided insight into one root of the issue.

One contributing element related to the parent, child, and teacher responsibility tension directly relates to parents’ unrealistic expectations of their children. As evident through their narratives, many participants included commentary on parents' unrealistic expectations for their
children when describing the propensity for teacher blame. Their definitions for these unrealistic parental perspectives hinges on parents assuming they know best about their children and their abilities, which aligns with the NEA’s (2007) description of helicopter parents as “perceived experts” about their children. Parents, relying on their expertise on their children, have higher expectations of their children than their children are capable of achieving. One teacher stated:

If parents have a certain idea of their child and they don’t want to ever have that ideal changed in their head, they will go to great lengths to protect it, and no matter how many people they’re hearing that are telling them differently, they’ll go to great, great lengths to protect their perception of their child.

Another teacher provided a similar account and stated:

They’re [teachers] thinking about what’s best for the child when they’re talking with parents who’ve had four or five kids and you know they’ve been through the school system, you know that can shake a teacher’s confidence pretty well, you know if they’re thinking about what’s best for a child and the parents are on another page.

In total, participants provided 21 responses related to unrealistic parental expectations of their children.

Participants identified parents’ unrealistic expectations for perfection with regard to their child’s academic capabilities. One teacher described parental expectations for academic success without parents or students putting forth any effort beyond the required minimum. She explained:

Or the ones [parents] that, “Oh, they always got 80s and 90s.” Well, it’s 6th grade now and not everybody can be an A student, and so that we set the bar high, but it seems like not only parents but depending on the district you’re in, retakes on tests, CSRs – if you get below a 70 you can make the corrections and bring it up to a 70. You know, I do believe in winning is not all, it’s how you play the game. And not everyone gets a trophy in life either. There has to be a balance, and not everyone can be a winner and 1st place, maybe your strength is elsewhere. This idea that there are no losers and that kind of concerns me, like I truly believe that children do need to fail. It’s part of life and they do need to accept that it’s not always winning things or having things come easy.
Another participant described a similar experience in which parents expected results from their children without any effort to learn curriculum-related material. She commented:

The kid wasn’t really a problem kid for me, not so much for me, about an average student, but the parent wanted them to be a straight A student and that wasn’t going to happen. They weren’t willing to put in time to help their child memorize their math facts, which are essential for 5th grade math and are supposed to be memorized before 5th grade. If you don’t have them memorized it impacts your grade and what you can do. And they just didn’t understand why their child wasn’t making straight A’s, well it’s hard to make straight A’s when you don’t have your facts and you can’t reduce a fraction.

Parental desire for above average academic performance may also relate to children already performing at an exemplary level. One teacher explained:

I have some students who will come to me crying because they have a 98 average and their parents want them to be doing extra credit and they don’t want to do it. Because I tell them they’re doing great and they don’t need extra credit, and their parents expect them to be perfect. And that is, sometimes I think that’s hardest to deal with, parents with too high of expectations than to deal with parents who are angry because their children aren’t doing well or have bad behaviors. Usually I can find some common ground with the parents who are angry, but it’s hard to explain to parents with too high of expectations that they need to lay off their kids because they’re gonna eventually have a melt down because classes are gonna get harder as they get older. And I tell them at parent orientation, your child will not get straight 100’s, do not expect straight A’s or straight E’s, they have to earn E’s and earn A’s and it’s not easy.

Additionally, as parental expectations for their children’s academic success increases, so does the propensity for blame of teachers. An interview participant stated:

Maybe they don’t want to believe their child would have bad behavior, or they want to believe that their child was smarter than they really are, or they want to blame the teacher for their child not doing their work.

In relation to parents and children shifting responsibility onto teachers, participants expressed, through 16 responses, the need to defer responsibility back to parents and children. Teachers primarily noted the need for parents to take responsibility for students’ academic progress as opposed to placing that responsibility on teachers. On participant stated:

Parents need to have more accountability for their children, and hopefully there will be some change directed toward that. That is a big difficulty. I did have a student this last
week fail a test, an A/B student in my class, failed miserably, and I told him he knew what to study. Well, I had you know soccer, and I had karate, and I had church on Wednesday, and gave e a whole long list of places they had to go and that he didn’t have time to study. And I’ve had other parents during the fall really upset over homework or testing expectations because of football season, and I’m sure in the spring we’ll see baseball and have the same thing, but the accountability has to go to the parents.

Another participant described the need for less one-sided communication regarding student progress. She commented, “A lot of the responsibility should be back on the parent and the kid. I mean in 8th grade and in high school, the teachers aren’t really going to email at all.”

Additionally, five teachers commented on the use of Grade Speed, an online grade book accessible to parents, as a tool to hold parents accountable for student progress. One teacher stated:

As far as parents being aware, it’s [Grade Speed] good because then parents aren’t, there’s no excuse for parents to say that hey had no clue what grades their child was making. Even if they don’t read the progress reports, at least it’s all online for them to see. More accountability, it’s more on them.

Another participant held a similar opinion and explained, “You know, I put my grades into Grade Speed on the weekend and I think if you have access to email, then you have access to Grade Speed and you can check in for yourself.”

Other teachers noted more accountability for students instead of continual teacher blame for students’ shortcomings. One interview participant indicated, “My expectation is that it’s [their schoolwork] the student’s responsibility and they need to be held accountable.” Another teacher emphasized the need for student accountability and responsibility for school work and explained, “Some of the instances here [in this district], the parent does the work and gets the grade. Instead of the student actually doing their job.” Additionally, district-wide technology implementations, such as Grade Speed, have teachers the opportunity to hold parents and
students accountable through grade postings. One interviewee, indicating the use of Grade Speed for parent accountability stated:

It’s not like the student isn’t aware that they had an assignment due, and a parent might not find out until four days after the fact that something was missing. The student knew they didn’t turn it in, and the student has known everyday since then that it wasn’t turned in. But it’s come to a point where you’ve got to stop doing so much hand holding because I don’t think it’s really teaching them much as far as getting ready for life, you’re just not.

The participants’ changing roles within the education system have been compounded by a shift in responsibility and accountability from parents for student progress and behavior. Teachers, perceiving a sense of blame for students’ shortcomings, also cited a number of tactics related to a decrease in their power as authority figures.

Depleting teacher power. Through the shift in the education system, the new parent-centered model (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996) has given rise to helicopter parents (Carroll, 2005; Jayson, 2007; Strauss, 2006). As a result, teachers experience newfound tensions with parents regarding responsibility for student academic progress and behavior in the classroom. This shift has impacted the hierarchical construction of power within the educational system, and has directly affected teachers’ standpoints related to their positioning within school systems. Teachers’ negotiations of new roles within the education system have been compounded by techniques utilized by parents to deplete teacher power including: unrealistic technology expectations, jumping the chain of command, and verbal aggression.

The most widely reported technique that parents use to deplete the power associated with teachers’ positions, relates to parents’ unrealistic technology expectations. Characterized by 21 participant responses, the category of unrealistic technology expectations encompasses: parent expectations regarding teachers’ use of email and teachers’ use of Grade Speed. Twelve teachers commented on parents’ unrealistic expectations regarding teachers’ use of email and, of those
comments nine related to expectations for quicker responses and four related to student progress updates. In regards to response expectation, one participant stated:

I think sometimes they expect it [communication via email] quicker than we can do it because we’re not at our computers we’re not in a job at the computer. My job at the computer is right now [planning time]. I can do it in the morning for attendance and now during my co-curr [co-curriculum, refers to a teacher’s planning time], or I could do it at the end of the day, but I don’t spend my day in front of the computer. My day is spent here talking with the kids, whatever. I think sometimes, if it comes in late and I don’t see it before I go home, they might be wondering, well, she didn’t respond. Sometimes, you just don’t get to it.

Another teacher reported similar experiences and stated:

Parents do have different expectations though. They don’t realize that we have a job to do, that we’re in front of the kids most of the time. I get to sit down during lunch and during my conference time to check my email but they feel like teachers are at their computer all the time. So they’ll send and email and you don’t get a chance to see it, and my conference time is 1 in the afternoon.

One participant described this disconnect between parent expectations for reply or quick response and teachers’ inability to answer emails frequently in terms of disproportionate communication, availability, and power. She indicated:

From their [the parents’] perspective we should be at their beck and call because of the technology that’s available to us. However it’s not reciprocal. You know, they don’t expect themselves to be as readily available to us, it’s just us who need to get back to them.

Additionally, four teachers reported unrealistic expectations regarding student updates, which four of five focus group participants identified with. One teacher commented:

It [email] works against us because you have those parents who are like, “Please let me know every time my child doesn’t turn an assignment in.” And I’m thinking really? I have 115 kids and you really want me to keep track of your one kid and let you know immediately when something happens.

These statements appear consistent with D’Urso’s (2006) finding that individuals in positions of power can exercise control over employees’ use of technology, specifically email. For teachers, parental demands for frequent and instantaneous communication function as a form of power
with regard to teachers’ use of email and Grade Speed. Likewise, Wood and Fasset (2003) indicated that technology can serve to undercut teacher power. Through consistent electronic communication, parents posit teachers as instruments for meeting client demands, and further reify teachers as customer service professionals (Murphy, 1992). These findings also correlate with Strauss’ (2006) explanation of helicopter parents’ use of technology for control in schools.

As two focus group participants noted:

   Participant 3: Some parents think that their child is the only child in your classroom and yes they know that there are 75 of them, but of course their baby is going to be the most important. However we try to make sure that everybody has the same thing, and it’s very hard to email 75 parents individually everyday.

   Participant 1: Especially when it’s, “You’re missing this, and this, and this” and some of them expect you to.

In addition to parent expectations regarding email, nine participant responses related to teachers’ use of Grade Speed to input student grades online. While teachers noted the positive aspects of Grade Speed in promoting parent and student responsibility for academic work, they also described the unrealistic expectations that parents have developed as a result of direct access to students’ grades. One teacher commented:

   I’ve also had experiences where I’ve had a child in my 4th period class take a test and mom will get online and see that there’s no grade there by 6th period and I get an email wondering why the grade’s not in there yet. You know, and I’m like that was an hour ago.

Another participant stated:

   Sometimes parents will say, if you don’t grade it fast enough, especially projects that take longer to grade, I have parents saying that ‘Oh, I haven’t seen it on Grade Speed yet’. Well, I have 75 students and yes I do grade on the weekends, but that can kind of be a negative.

This expectation for disproportionate response relates to Hartsock’s (1987) conceptualization of power as a differentiation of realities and individual’s standpoints. Thus, parents, operating under
the dominant ideology that frequency in parent-teacher communication functions as a positive influence within school systems, define the reality of parent-teacher communication based on their conceptualizations. As a result, teachers, now in positions of lesser or equal power to parents as a result of the educational paradigm shift, struggle to situate their standpoints within the larger ideology. These disproportionate expectations also lend themselves to the emphasis on consumer-based models for parent-teacher communication (Vincent, 1996), in which teachers adopt a customer service role directly tied to meeting the needs of parents.

Another tactic teachers reported parents utilizing related to bureaucratic hierarchy. Seven participants reported parents “jumping the chain of command,” which included parents contacting assistant principals, principals, or school district administrators prior to establishing contact with the teacher to discuss a student problem or issue or in order to exert power over teachers. This categorization encompasses ten participant responses, that include jumping the chain of command because of perceived email unresponsiveness, disagreements with teachers, threats, and communication misunderstandings. In regards to email unresponsiveness, participants again highlighted the negative impact of email with regard to parent-teacher communication. One teacher stated:

I had a parent who would email me several times a day, sometimes the same email sent over and over and over, expecting me to respond immediately when I was actually teaching and then would contact my assistant principal and tell her that I was unresponsive.

Another participant shared a similar experience and stated, “I get the email at 8am and by 1pm I have a call from the principal wondering why I didn’t respond to the email. Well I haven’t seen my email.” Other teachers discussed parental contacts to administrators over disagreements with teacher classroom policies. An interview participant described an issue with a parent regarding a student’s missing assignment. After she sent a note home with a student stating that assignment
needed to be turned in the following day, “The mom didn’t contact me [the teacher], she
 contacted the AP and even went from the AP, because she didn’t like his response and went to
 the administration building.” Another teacher stated:

    Or they call the principal and complain that they didn’t know that their child had to have
    something by a specific date, it’s really frustrating because we make sure the kids write
down these things in their agenda, we send home weekly newsletters, and it feels like all
of that effort, maybe I’m lucky if 10% of parents actually read the stuff, actually open
their child’s agenda, actually read the newsletter. That’s the frustrating part.

Additionally, parents utilized threats of contacting school and district administration as a means
to exercise control and influence teacher behaviors. One teacher explained a threat from a parent
that not only insinuated involvement from school administrators, but also from civil rights
entities. She commented:

    I just had one [a parent] this year who threatened to go to the NAACP and to report me to
the superintendent and email the superintendent, um, emails that we had sent to each
other in correspondence about a disciplinary measure um, that the whole campus uses, I
mean it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

Through involving administrators and school district officials in parent-teacher communication
without as a means to directly bypass teachers, parents usurp teachers’ power to handle parent-
teacher communication and indicate that desired action, regardless of teachers preferences, can
be obtained through communication with other officials.

    A third technique parents use to deplete teacher power includes the use of verbal
aggression. This categorization consisted of eight responses related to name calling and verbal
attacks. Researchers (Infante & Wigley, 1986) defined verbal aggression as, “attacking the self-
concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person’s position on a topic
communication” (p. 53). Scholars (Infante, 1987; Infante et al., 1992; Infante & Wigley, 1986)
have indicated the negative uses of verbal aggression including, but not limited to: decreasing
credibility, personal attacks, inciting inadequacy and embarrassment. Participants noted parental
use of verbal aggression to degrade their knowledge, decrease their credibility, and intimidate them into reconsidering academic and behavioral policies. Three participants reported parental verbal aggression as a means to intimidate teachers. One participant described a parent, unwilling to comply with teacher requests to bring a student into tutoring, negatively reacting to a meeting in which staff were discussing possible student retention with a mother. The participant stated, “And she [the mother] yelled, I mean you could hear her from the office, closed doors all the way across, I mean all the way throughout the whole school. She was just yelling, yelling, yelling.” Another teacher indicated, “I’ve had parents make me cry and slam the phone down on me, and things like that, and yell at me, verbally attack.” Other teachers indicated the use of parental verbal aggression in order to degrade teacher knowledge through name-calling. Another participant recalled an instance of verbal aggression following a parent-teacher phone call to discuss discipline issue in the classroom. She commented, “Mom starts cussing me out, using the f-word, because it was my fault that she was skipping my class because I was a terrible teacher. She later hung up on me.” These instances of parental verbal aggression also encompass name-calling as a response to teacher-instigated communication. One teacher called a parent to discuss her son’s inability to retake a test:

    She hung up on me and then sent me an email that called me the most obtuse and irritating person she had ever met. She then told me she had to re-teach all the lessons to her son because I was so terrible.

For teachers, these parental verbal attacks serve as a threat to teacher positioning as authority figures within school hierarchies, and further establish the level of power parents attempt to assert in order to influence teachers and classroom management.

    With regard to their positioning within the educational system, study participants indicated that the paradigm shift, accountability for student behavior and progress, and depletion
of teacher power have defined their roles as teachers. Over the last 20 years, as parents have become more involved in school systems, teachers have experienced less control and authority with regard to curriculum and classroom management. Additionally, teachers appear to struggle with issues of accountability, as a vast number of participants indicated incidents of blame for student progress. Parents appear to shift responsibility for both academic and behavioral issues to teachers, and as a result, parents degrade teachers’ power and assume a sense of leverage in exerting power and control in schools. In addition to addressing issues of blame, teachers also identified strategies parents utilize to deplete their power as authority figures further. Teachers, through their narratives, appeared to clarify and confirm researchers (Carroll, 2005; Cullingford, 1996; Gibbs, 2005; MetLife, 2005; NEA, 2007; Strauss, 2006; Thomas, 1996, Vincent, 1996) explanations of shifts in the educational system, and the diminished role of the teacher. Additionally, teachers’ explanations of their perceived positions also provide insight into teachers’ required use of emotional labor.

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked, “What do K-12 teachers’ narratives of memorable interactions with parents reveal about the process of emotional labor communication?” The predominant theme of emotional labor, categorized by 20 participant responses, emerged in support of RQ2. This theme encompassed many facets of emotional labor per researchers’ descriptions of the concept including: complying with job-related expectations (Adelmann, 1995; Guy Newman, & Mastracci, 2008), maintaining “positive” parent-teacher communication (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993), and emotional dissonance (Abraham, 1998, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996).
Complying with job-related expectations. Scholars (Adelmann 1995; Grandey, 2000; Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2008; Morris & Feldman, 1996) have indicated that the definition of emotional labor encompasses employer and job-related expectations about required emotional effort in the workplace. For employees, display rules, or social and organizational norms, establish criteria that guide workplace interactions (Morris & Feldman, 1996). These implicit or explicit expectations may encompass policies on: desired emotion regulation, interactions with customers, and, through Grandey’s (2000) extension of the definition, frequency of interaction. Participants expressed the prevalence of emotional labor within their experiences communicating with parents, and noted the need to engage in emotion management in order to maintain appropriate parent-teacher communication per school and administration definition. For many participants, parent-teacher communication comprises a large part of their jobs and, as a result, teachers exert additional effort beyond the classroom to foster parent-teacher relationships. This sentiment appears consistent with researchers’ connection between emotional labor and employer expectations for managing client-related workplace demands (Hargreaves, 1998; Näring, Briët, & Borwers, 2006, Sutton, 2004). One participant described the emphasis on parent-teacher communication within her school and district, and stated, “In this district, it’s top on your priority list, you’ve got to do it.” Another teacher reported a similar sentiment:

I would just say that it’s just one of those things that comes with the job, and it’s not going away – as much as I would love to just be able to teach my kids and not worry about parents.

Throughout the interview and focus group sessions, teachers largely agreed that managing communication with parents requires a significant amount of effort beyond their basic job descriptions, which often leads to teachers developing negative perceptions of interactions with parents. One teacher commented, “When I think of communicating with parents it usually
brings up negative things because I think of the negative ones that I’ve had to put so much energy into.” Another participant described school expectations of parent-teacher communication as the need to be “Very diplomatic, and really the whole reason I left teaching in the first place the first time was not because of the kids, it was all um, just the political BS.” These negative connotations between parent-teacher communication and involvement and emotional labor coincide with emotion regulation strategies. Researchers (Grandey, 2000; Pugliesi, 1999) have indicated that employees experiencing multiple negative interactions frequently engage in emotion regulation in order to manage customer interactions, which often negatively impacts employee job satisfaction.

Researchers (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000; Morris & Feldman, 1996) explained that frequent interpersonal interactions, which require time and energy beyond basic job expectations, relate to the use of emotional labor in the workplace. Understanding parent-teacher communication and the resulting emotional result from on the job training in which new teachers learn organizational norms and expectations. For many teachers, schools and administrators establish norms for parent-teacher communication in terms of frequency of interaction and maintaining a certain level of composure, but many teachers also rely on alternative means of socialization. In response to learning how to communicate with parents, a teacher stated:

Definitely on the job, you rely a lot on peers, on what to say, what to do, what not to say [laughs] and you’re trying to say it in a way that’s not offensive because you’re not judging, you’re telling them what happened straight up.

Another teacher described the covert organizational rhetoric of most schools and school districts that teachers must learn to negotiate and noted, “Um, I think we do a lot of placating to parents. Um, I think all of us, I think the sooner you learn that as a teacher, maybe the better off your
experience as a teacher will be.” As evident through participants’ narratives, administrators and school officials expect teachers to engage in certain levels of communication with parents. Because of these expectations, teachers often engage in higher levels of emotional labor in order to manage the frequent contact with parents. Furthermore, because of the additional emotional labor requirements stemming from contact with “customers,” or parents, teachers face a higher risk of stress and burnout (Hargreaves, 1998; Hochschild, 1983; Näring, Briët, & Borwers, 2006; Sutton, 2004).

Maintaining “positive” parent-teacher communication. As previously indicated, researchers (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000) have explained that organizations and employers establish a set of expectations related to interactions among service workers and customers. Hochschild (1979) highlighted the relevance of feeling rules, or display rules, when describing interactions requiring the display of emotion. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) defined display rules as rules commonly accepted by society and organizations that govern what expressions are appropriate for a given situation. In order to comply with employer expectations, employees often internalize feeling or display rules, and adjust their outward expressions accordingly. Fourteen participants indicated the need to adjust communication with parents in order to reflect the diplomacy and delivery commonly expected by school administrators.

Teachers explained the need to monitor their emotions, in both written and face-to-face interactions, in order to soften communication and maintain school defined “positive” relationships with parents. One participant commented:

You have to watch how you say things. When I first started teaching, it’s not like I wasn’t polite or I didn’t think through the best ways to say things, but there are some things you’re going to lock horns with parents with and it’s important to not make them feel humiliated or less smart than you or put down when you’re talking to them.
Other participants echoed this need for tact in order to avoid further exacerbating a negative situation or conveying negative information in an abrasive manner. Multiple teachers addressed negative parental responses following the delivery of bad news. After explaining to a mother that her child skipped a seventh period class, one teacher experienced a telephone conversation involving harsh verbal aggression. Trying to cope with the situation she stated:

‘Ma’am, I’m so sorry, if you would like to come in trying to be diplomatic, I’m sorry that you feel this way, but she was just going off. . . . I was like ‘Okay, sorry you feel that way.’

Other teachers indicated the need to manage negative interactions through maintaining a sense of tact and diplomacy, as one participant explained, “a lot of times you have to just be very diplomatic, slow them down and say wait was minute and talk through it.” For many teachers, email provides a filter for communication, and ensures the most organizationally appropriate responses. While several participants indicated their preference for this method of managing parent-teacher communication to ensure a sense of tact and foster “positive” relationships, one teacher’s commentary encapsulated the sentiments of many. She noted that via email:

I can calm down, think about it, type it out the way it should sound, get my um partner to look at it and ask if it sounds bad or is okay, get another opinion before you say something that’s not professional.

Another predominant strategy teachers utilized in order to maintain “positive relationships” related to delivery during communication. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated the need to use a combination of positive and negative comments, especially when addressing poor child behavior or negative academic performance. This perception often leads teachers to “couch” parent-teacher communication within positive statements. When categorizing the nature of parent-teacher communication and the need for careful delivery, one teacher stated, “It’s painful, sometimes you have to have the right amount of complements and empathy for whatever
their home life is, it’s kinda like anesthesia to prepare you for something that’s going to be painful.” Several teachers indicated the use of the “sandwiching technique,” in which teachers utilize the sequence of one positive comment, one negative comment, and a follow-up positive comment to help convey negative student-related information. For example one participant explained, “Even emailing, I try to, when it’s not very nice, try to start things off with a positive or something nice like ‘I love having your child in class’.” A focus group member shared a similar experience and stated:

   Sometimes I feel like it’s [communication with parents] like making a sales call. Like I’m trying to sell my opinion on something or you know I also have to go say something positive first, then whatever’s going on, then positive again and watch how you say things.

   Ultimately, teachers, experiencing pressure from schools and administrators, attempt to sustain parent-teacher communication through positively framing negative communication or maintaining a level of diplomacy during interaction. Furthermore, the restrictions on communication, whereby teachers feel pressured to focus on positive expressions of emotions, have power-related implications. Researchers (Morris & Feldman, 1996, 1997) have stated that the emotional expressions of employees directly relate to the status and power of the recipient. As the status and power of the service recipient increase, so does the emphasis on employee use of positive emotional display. The need on the part of teachers to be positive in their communication with parents is a clear indication of parents’ increased status in the educational hierarchy. Furthermore, the consistent emotional labor required during parent-teacher interactions, and the emphasis on positive communication, often conflicts with teacher’s personal feelings regarding parents, students, and work-related situations, as will be discussed next.

   Emotional dissonance. Hochschild (1983) explained that employees in positions requiring high levels of emotional labor oftentimes experience a disconnect between personal
values and beliefs and organizational expectations. Middleton (1989) later identified this disconnect as emotional dissonance, and researchers (Abraham, 1998, 1999; Morris & Feldman, 1996) have incorporated the term into the conceptualization of emotional labor. Employees experiencing a conflict between personal and organizationally required emotions, more frequently engage in emotional labor (Morris & Feldman, 1996). According to Morris and Feldman (1997), “The act of expressing sanctioned emotions during interpersonal interactions (i.e. emotional labor) becomes more demanding when it requires greater effort to control ‘true’ emotions” (p. 259). Therefore, as the divide between personal and work place expectations increases, so does employee exertion of emotional labor.

In this study, participants commented on the need for honesty during interactions, but teachers, experiencing pressure based on organizational parent-teacher communication norms, found themselves forced to mask their personal opinions about children, parents, and work-related situations in order to project district and school appropriate emotions. Many teachers referred to organizational pressures to maintain “positive” relationships with parents, and indicated the emphasis on pressures to couch negative information positively. This lack of teacher honesty in interactions also indicates the increased power of parents within the educational system, and indicates a shift in parental roles. An interviewee described the limits on personal expressions of opinion and commented:

You aren’t saying anything judgmental; it has to be very factual, which is sometimes difficult. You can say your kid’s great, they’re doing well, that’s judgmental to me, um you’re making a judgment on what that kid is doing. But you can’t say your kid is a turd, they never do their work, they don’t know how to behave, they interrupt other children, you have to be specific.

Another teacher also shared her experiences negotiating the boundaries of honesty and following implied standards set by school and district administrators. She stated:
I feel like you have to be very guarded in everything you say and everything you do, lots of CYA, and it’s unfortunate because there’s times that I would, that I think it would benefit the child if I could be more upfront and honest, and there’s times that I really, really want to be and I think the parent’s receptive to it, but based on the liability that it could put, you know, I have to refrain.

This theme of constraint appeared consistent across each emotional labor narrative. Teachers, bound by organizational norms and rules, continually alter or refrain from delivering truthful, negative information, despite personal desire for candor during parent-teacher communication.

For some, the emotional dissonance experienced during parent-teacher interactions leads to a shift from feigning outward expressions of emotion to accepting the inevitability of conflict between personal beliefs and work expectations. As the push to maintain parental involvement from administrators continues to increase, and the emphasis on maintaining a parent-centered approach becomes a priority in many districts (Cullingford, 1996), teachers face greater levels of emotional labor. As noted by one participant, the need to meet school and district administrator’s expectations related to parent-teacher communication sometimes places teachers into a forced state of emotional dissonance. She stated:

I think the sooner teachers learn to try to do what the parents want without giving up convictions, or totally giving up convictions, but sometimes you have to. It’s constraining. You feel like you have to be more on your toes with what you say.

As evident through participants’ narratives, teachers routinely experience the need for emotional labor during instances of parent-teacher communication. Through employer expectations for “proper” parent-teacher communication and maintaining “positive” communication with parents, teachers often experience emotional dissonance as a result of balancing personal and professional attitudes and opinions. These findings suggest a stronger link between parent-teacher communication and emotional labor than previously investigated, and provide support for unintended consequences stemming from positive parental-involvement
rhetoric in schools. As indicated by researchers (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Kruml & Geddes, 2000; Leidner, 1999; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Steinberg & Figart, 1999) the prolonged need for emotional labor directly correlates with the development of stress and burnout among employees in the service industry. Participants’ narratives highlight this connection between the teaching profession, emotional labor, and stress. The prevalence of stress among teachers is further explicated in the next section.

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked, “What do K-12 teachers’ narratives of memorable interactions with parents reveal about outcomes stemming from parent-teacher communication?” Three categories emerged in support of RQ3: teacher expression of stress, teacher stressors, and outcomes stemming from parent-teacher communication. Seven teachers made explicit statements regarding their perceptions of job related stress. Twenty-seven participant responses referenced stress and burnout factors, which included workload, role conflict/ambiguity, and lack of preparations; 36 participant responses identified outcomes of stress and burnout, which included positive parent-teacher communication, job dissatisfaction, and intent to quit.

Teacher expression of stress. Scholars (Brown & Ralph, 1998; Kyriacou, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996, 1998) have confirmed the prevalence of stress among K-12 public school teachers. Among the factors associated with the teaching profession, relationships with parents and the community (Brown & Ralph, 1998), lack of time (Brown & Ralph, 1998; Dworking, 1987), role ambiguity (Dunham, 1992; Rudow, 1999; Travers & Cooper, 1996), and workload (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005; Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Friesen & Williams, 1985) appeared as the most frequent causes of participant stress. As these stressors appeared
through teacher narratives, so did participants’ explicit statements of work-related stress stemming from increases in parent-teacher communication. One teacher stated:

It’s [parent-teacher communication] probably one of the most stressful parts of my job. Um, and it depends on the year and the parents that you have and the kids that you have, um, but it’s always the most stressful part of your job.

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment and commented, “That’s probably the most frustrating thing, the communication with parents, and sometimes the support of the parents [for teachers] is the most difficult.” This notion of difficulty was present throughout each of the seven narratives, and two participants noted the difficulty in performing teaching related duties while managing parent-teacher communication. As one teacher stated through the use of a metaphor:

It’s [parent-teacher communication] is like a hemorrhoid, it’s a pain in the ass, it’s [the stress] there all the time, you still have to do your job, but it’s always there, every time. It’s [the stress] never going away.

These narratives provided a foundation for discussion of factors contributing to stress and outcomes resulting from continual exposure to and management of job-related stressors.

Teacher stressors. The first contributor to the development of teacher stress and burnout relates to teacher workload. Researchers have noted the prevalence of teacher workload, and the relationship between workload and teacher stress (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Friesen & Williams, 1985; Rudow, 1999; Temperly & Robinson, 2000). Furthermore, Austin, Shah, and Muncer (2005) found that teachers perceived workload as the most predominant factor related to stress. Nineteen participants indicated increased workload and greater time constraints resulting from parent-teacher communication. One teacher commented, “I feel like sometimes I feel like…. It’s a lot of extra work and when parents email me and ask me things that are in the weekly emails that I send home and it’s been there for three weeks.” Another teacher also described the increases in workload, specifically related to the availability of technology as a
channel for parent-teacher communication. She stated:

If you type up a whole email to send to the parents, then you have to print it off and make photocopies and make sure that you have a list so those kids get it. So that’s harder work than photocopying it and giving it to the kids.

Two participants explained the disconnect between expectations related to parent-teacher communication and heavy workload. One teacher noted:

I think it’s a sad thing for teachers especially new teachers now because there’s so much and so many of them are overwhelmed, um, even teachers returning to the teaching field after being out are overwhelmed by the amount of work they’re expected to do and the amount of communication they’re expected to keep up.

Another participant described the changes to teacher workload as related to parent-teacher communication. She indicated, “It [parent-teacher communication] is a huge time consuming part of my job now in addition to teaching, lesson planning, and grading and administrative work that continues to increase, this [parent-teacher communication] is another aspect that’s increasing.”

Along with increased workload for teachers, both in administrative duties related to parent communication and parent-teacher communication itself, teachers also experience a lack of proportional time throughout the school day to complete required tasks (Dworkin, 1987; Travers & Cooper, 1996). Researchers (Dunham, 1992; Friesen & Williams; 1985) indicated lack of time to complete work as a contributing factor in the development of stress and burnout. When describing the lack of time teachers have to address parent-teacher communication, one participant stated:

My conference time is limited, I have 45 min of conference time during the day and at the end of the day 45 min. However, during that time um twice a week after school I have to tutor for those entire 45 min so that’s gone, uh we have a faculty meeting, so that’s gone, so there are 2 days that I actually have those 45 min and there are so many admin duties to do that you don’t always get to grading or lesson planning or other activities that you need to do.
Three other teachers commented on the amount of time required in order to communicate with parents on a daily basis. One participant commented:

“It’s [parent-teacher communication] a very time consuming process for that many children. So we have at least one face-to-face meeting with every parent, um anyone who’s failed the TAKS test or is at risk we have to have another meeting with, um face-to-face, and then of course you’re always going to call parents and send notes and email throughout the day, and we probably do that on a daily basis at least.

Another teacher detailed the communication necessary following a student discipline issue. She stated, “So if there’s five students involved, that’s five instances of documentation, that’s five phone calls, and I mean that could be three days worth of your conference time to do those five phone calls.”

As evident through teacher narratives, increased workload and time constraints, as well as increased parent-teacher communication, create additional demands on teachers beyond classroom and teaching related duties. Teachers, experiencing workload and time pressures, oftent experience increased levels of job-related stress (Rudow, 1999, Travers & Cooper, 1996). If left unchecked, these teachers face a greater risk of burnout and intent to leave the profession (Rudow, 1999).

Another factor related to the development of stress and burnout among teachers includes issues of role conflict and definition. Dunham (1992) defined role conflict as, “conflict [that] occurs because management posts contain several parts of other people’s roles which are very difficult to integrate into a coherent pattern” (p. 38). Role ambiguity, similar to role conflict, occurs when employees lack a clear definition of job-related expectations (Beehr, 1976). Several researchers (Brown & Ralph, 1998; Dunham, 1992; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970; Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986; Miller, Zook, & Ellis, 1989; Travers & Cooper, 1996; Walsh, 1998) have identified role conflict and role ambiguity as factors contributing to stress and burnout.
Seven study participants indicated feelings of role conflict and ambiguity in which they experienced multiple, often conflicting roles, which stemmed from a lack of definition or additional expectations of their roles as teachers.

With regard to role conflict, one teacher commented on the need to assume the dual role of parent and teacher. She stated, “You sometimes have to become the parent and work out something to get the kid to do what they need to do in class. It’s the fine line of playing mom, and friend on top of the teacher role.” Three other participants commented on the perceived expectations of teachers as babysitters. One teacher commented, “A lot of times parents think we’re babysitters and just tell them [students] to do page 12, one through ten, and let me know if you have questions, and that we do nothing.” Another participant recalled discussing a discipline incident with a parent. He stated, “It made me feel like I was more so babysitting, rather than to teach the kid that there’s reasonable consequences and rewards.” Other teachers indentified the need to create self-defined descriptions of their roles for parents in order to help clarify parent expectations. One participant commented, “My job is teaching the students, my job is NOT communicating with the parents. If I’m getting to the child and the child is learning, that’s my job.”

Ten participants also indicated that the lack of preparation and expectations related to parent-teacher communication contributed to stress. When discussing how teachers learned to handle parent-teacher interactions, participants stated that they lacked formal training through education course during their college careers. One teacher commented:

It’s a much more stressful part of the job than they really prepare you for in college. Because, well, when I was doing student teaching they did let me make some phone calls, um, they went ahead if the teacher had to sign their folders more than three times a week, then the student got a short form and then they would call the parents and document on the short from their communication with parents. We would, at some point, they let me make some calls, but they also kinda safeguarded me – they kept some of the tougher
parents and said we won’t make you call these parents because they’re going to be difficult to deal with.

Another teacher explained the relevance of formal education in learning to deal with parents. She stated, “The curriculum and pedagogy is the easy part, it’s everything they’re [professors and administrators] not telling you that’s the hard part.” An interview participant described a complete lack of training and stated, “Back in the day, they didn’t teach us how to deal with parents at all, and I don’t know if they even do so now, so I wasn’t expecting [it], no.”

Teachers, experiencing a deficit in terms of formally taught techniques to help manage parent-teacher communication, reported a sense of ambiguity when dealing with parents. One participant noted that parent-teacher communication appeared similar to, “I guess an atomic bomb. You’re giving them update and thinking please don’t go off, please don’t go off, please don’t go off.” Another teacher also utilized a metaphor to categorize the ambiguity during these interactions, and stated, “It’s [parent-teacher communication] most like…opening a Cracker Jack box – you don’t ever know what you’re going to get.” Two other teachers described difficulty in managing interactions with parents because of a lack of readily available strategies for dealing with specific situations. One participant stated, “You know, if they catch you off guard, if you get a phone call and you haven’t even thought about what happened, and they’re asking you questions, it’s hard.”

Outcomes of parent-teacher communication. In addition to outlining parent-teacher communication related stressors, teachers also indicated three outcomes of parent-teacher communication: positive parent-teacher communication, job dissatisfaction, and intent to quit. While a majority of participants’ responses indicated negative associations between parent-teacher communication, stressors, and outcomes, some participants identified positive outcomes of parent teacher communication. Nineteen teachers reported at least one positive outcome of
parent-teacher communication, however, only seven of the 19 narratives indicated a predominantly positive experience; the remaining 12 described positive outcomes as outliers of daily experiences. In response to a positive outcome of parent-teacher communication, one participant stated:

It makes me feel good because I’ve worked in situations where parents were not involved and now where parents are overly involved. I see what the involvement helps. When parents are involved, students are more productive. I like communicating in that the parent, teacher, and student are all on the same page.

Another teacher noted the positive aspect of parent-teacher communication in building a parent, student, and teacher partnership. She indicated:

I’ve had parents send me emails from parents saying this is the best team of teachers that their child’s ever had and how organized we are and how much they really appreciate it. And parents who are supportive that I said your daughter shouldn’t be wearing make-up, your children shouldn’t have cell phones unless it’s just to contact you after school because they walk home. Parents have been very supportive and they feel that I’m supporting them at home, like a partnership.

One participant also described the positive nature of parent-teacher communication, but highlighted the disproportionate amount of effort related to negative communication and interaction. He commented:

I want to say that like 95% of the time it’s good, that even when you have something negative to say they’ve already heard it or they want to solve the problem, but it’s those, that small percentage that we seem to remember and deal with the most. If they’re, they hang up on us, or call us because there was something small that happened that we don’t give the kid a pencil or we don’t let them use the restroom, that they hear one side of the story, and it’s that that I keep thinking about.

While five of the seven interview and focus group participants reported positive parent-teacher communication, they also highlighted the small percentage of demanding parents that required significantly more attention in managing those relationships. For other teachers, the frequency of negative parent-teacher communication directly related to depletion of job satisfaction, and at times, intent to quit.
Scholars (Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey, & Bassler, 2001; Farber, 1991, 1993; Miller, Zook, & Ellis, 1989; Ray & Miller, 1991) have outlined the connection between exposure to chronic stress and the development of burnout. Furthermore, this connection between stress and burnout particularly applies to teachers, as researchers (Haberman, 2005; Hock, 1988; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Travers & Cooper, 1996; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000) have identified teachers as an “at risk” population. One common sign of burnout relates to a lack of productivity and job-satisfaction (Dworkin, 1987; Maslach, 1982). Ianni and Reuss-Ianni (1983) indicated that feelings of dissatisfaction often mark the beginning of the burnout cycle. Ten teachers expressed feelings of job dissatisfaction as a result of parent-teacher communication stressors. One teacher accurately summed up the thoughts of the ten participants. She noted, “I would say that that’s the most difficult, is communicating with parents.” Another teacher shared a similar feeling and explained, “If there was anything that made this job harder, it’s communicating with parents. They don’t get it, whatever their reason.” One participant identified communicating with parents as the main stressor of the teaching profession and explained, “It’s [communicating with parents] the worst part, by far. I hate it. I hate it. It’s the worst part of anything – parents over-involved, parents not believing what you’re saying, all of it.”

Three participants described a school year requiring extensive emotional labor as a result of constant communication with one parent. One of the participants stated, “That was the year that I hated my job and wanted to quit and tried to think of any other thing that I could do because it wasn’t worth it. Just because of one parent.” Another teacher shared her experience and stated:

I felt that, that I was a failure because of one child. Because I felt like I should have been able to reach him even though I didn’t or couldn’t at that point, even though I tried, due to the fact that he didn’t make it, it [communicating with the parent] made me feel like somewhere I had dropped the ball.
One interview participant commented:

I have one other parent, she’s never going to be happy. And that’s hard for me because you go into teaching thinking I’m gonna help these kids, and they’re [parents] gonna love me because I’m bending over backwards, and then afterwards you’re like ‘why am I even doing this?’ It’s just not worth it.

For these teachers, the continual experience of parent-teacher contact has added to workload, time constraints, and ultimately a lack of passion and commitment to their jobs, thus indicating a stronger link between parent-teacher communication and teacher job dissatisfaction than previous researchers have recognized. Friedman and Farber (1992) indicated that the discrepancies between professional-self concept, defined as the conceptualization of one’s abilities, lowers teachers’ overall job satisfaction and contributes to burnout. Furthermore, researchers (Farber, 1991; Friedman & Farber, 1992) have found that teachers who experience routine job dissatisfaction often develop feelings of inconsequentiality. In turn, “many teachers experiencing these problems choose to leave the profession” (Hock, 1988, p. 169).

Scholars (Dworkin, 1987; Hock, 1988) have indicated the potential for burned-out employees to utilize exit strategies as a method to escape the stress and burnout cycle. In terms of this study, teachers indicated two forms of exit: removing one’s self from the situation and intent to quit. Three teachers identified exit from parent-teacher communication situations as a response to excessive stress. Following an incident of parental verbal aggression that stemmed from a student discipline issue, one teacher stated:

I, I literally left. I went down and told my assistant principal what happened and I was like I gotta go. I had to leave, that was the last straw. You’re dealing with kids all day and trying to manage their behaviors and then at that point it was the last string, I was done.

Another teacher recalled a similar incident following a negative parent-teacher conference. She explained, “I informed the principal that I had um, had enough, that the expectations of the parent were unrealistic and that I was no longer going to be in direct contact with that parent.”
The third participant indicated a removal strategy, however her approach varied from the other two teachers. Following a negative parent-teacher conference and a series of negative emails, the teacher stated, “I can tell you I don’t go to Albertson’s anymore because that’s where she [the mom] worked.” However, other participants stated intent to quit because of overwhelming stress and feelings of burnout. One teacher commented, “It’s um, if there was one thing that probably made me leave the profession of teaching it would be the parents.” Another participant, following a negative parent encounter, commented, “I really wanted to quit, but I just had to leave for the day.”
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate K-12 teachers standpoints related to parent-teacher communication. Researchers (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996) have documented a shift in the education system, in which school and district administrators have incorporated a more parent-centered, consumer-based focus within K-12 public schools. Through the rise of parental involvement, helicopter parents, and the subsequent increase in parent-teacher communication, teachers may experience a perceived shift in their positions within the educational system. Already coping with job-related emotional labor and stress and burnout (Carlyle & Woods, 2002; Dunham, 1992; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Saellis, & Parker, 2000), teachers may experience additional work demands as a direct result of an increase in parent-teacher communication. Utilizing standpoint theory to frame teachers’ standpoints within the hierarchy of the public school system, I posited three research questions related to teachers’ perceived positioning within the educational system, experience of parent-teacher communication related to emotional labor, and outcomes of parent-teacher communication. Through 25 face-to-face interviews, and one focus group session of 5 participants, teachers shared personal narratives addressing memorable parent-teacher communication, the relationship between parent-teacher communication and perceptions of being a teacher, the impact of technology on parent-teacher communication, and past and present expectations and experiences related to parent-teacher communication as part of the teaching profession.

Following a qualitative analysis of transcripts guided by standpoint theory and the three research questions, nine themes emerged which addressed the research questions. One predominant theme in support of research question one related to teachers’ perceptions of
powerlessness or lack of control within their respective schools and classrooms. As district and school administrators move toward maintaining a parent-centered focus, participants reported that interactions with demanding and over-involved parents as a key indicator of the decrease in teacher authority. Additionally, teachers noted a sense of ambiguity in terms of parent, child, and teacher responsibility for student behavior and progress, which ultimately allows some parents to shift accountability for their children solely onto teachers. In support of research question two, teachers explained the increase in emotional labor related to parent-teacher communication through school and district administrators’ expectations about frequency of communication with parents, pressure to maintain “positive” parent interactions, and emotional dissonance (Kruml & Geddes, 2000) as a result of projecting school appropriate feelings during parent-teacher communication that conflicted with teachers’ personal beliefs and opinions. In support of research question three, teachers frequently expressed feelings of stress related to parent-teacher communication. Through increased workload, time demands, and role ambiguity associated with parent-teacher communication, teachers experienced greater feelings of job dissatisfaction, burnout, and intent to quit.

This study is important for a number of reasons. First, findings of this study validate the importance of studying parent-teacher communication. While researchers have investigated various factors related to teacher stress and burnout (Carlyle & Woods, 2002; Dworkin, 1987; Hodge, Jupp, & Taylor, 1994; Howard & Johnson, 2004) and the frequent need for teachers to employ emotional labor in the workplace (Guy et al., 2008), they have primarily focused on teachers’ student-based interactions and the need for teachers to assume teaching and administrative duties in schools. To date, researchers have failed to take into account the role of parent-teacher communication in relation to teacher perceptions of power within the educational
system, teacher stress and burnout, and the use of emotional labor to manage interpersonal interactions. This deficit in research appears problematic in relation to teachers’ perceptions of job-related stressors. MetLife (2005) indicated that K-12 public school teachers reported parent-teacher interactions as the most stressful or “least desirable” aspect of their jobs. Although broad analyses of a variety of factors influencing teachers’ perceptions of their jobs help provide a general understanding of the teaching field, researchers need to focus on teachers’ perceptions of negative work-related duties and interactions, as teacher insight may clarify the most salient factors related to the alarmingly high attrition rate within the teaching profession. The findings from this study support MetLife’s (2005) report on the state of the education field, as many participants from this study indicated parent-teacher communication as one of the most, if the not the most, stressful part of teaching. This study becomes increasingly relevant in relation to the current effects of teacher attrition on the educational system. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) identified the loss of qualified teachers and the subsequent decrease in quality of education for students as a result of the high turnover rate within the profession as a factor for concern, and estimated a 2.2 billion dollar annual national expense to replace teachers leaving the field. As teachers continue to experience emotional labor, stress, and burnout within the workplace, the effects of the growing attrition rate expand beyond individual school districts to pose problems for the educational system nationwide.

Second, significant conflict exists between parents and teachers about who is responsible for students’ academic progress and behavior in the classroom. As study participants indicated, increased parental involvement often correlates with parents deferring responsibility for their children to teachers. Teachers identified continual blame for student misbehaviors in class, lack of academic progress, and lack of compliance with classroom management as a predominant
tension in the parent-teacher relationship. Often, parents utilized shifts in blame and responsibility to teachers, which ultimately functioned as attempts to deplete teacher power and authority. In addition to shifting responsibility for children to teachers, parents created greater job-related demands for teacher with regard to workload and time constraints. Teachers, already managing curriculum and administrative duties aligned with their positions in the educational system (Dunham, 1992; Walsh, 1998), then struggle with maintaining documentation of student progress and the resulting communication with parents.

Through this shift in responsibility of parents and children to teachers, the voices of parents and children are continually privileged over those of teachers. Many participants reported parent perceptions of their “children as authority” and explained the difficulty in presenting their points of view in a legitimized manner. In order to validate their perspectives, teachers are forced to utilize school-mandated documentation of their communication with parents and incidents with children as proof of their job performance. Furthermore, when school officials require documentation of parent-teacher communication and student progress and behaviors, they discredit teachers’ authority, credibility, and ultimately power, and reify parental power within the educational system. Additionally, teachers now function as scapegoats for parents, which ultimately allows parents to rely on school systems and teachers for their children’s education, and absolves parents of their role in instilling work ethic and responsibility in their children. As a result of continual blame for parent and student shortcomings and lack of job-related credibility and authority, teachers experience additional stress and, in turn greater job dissatisfaction.

Finally, the insertion of technology in the classroom has raised additional issues: concerns over how much communication is enough, mismatched expectations about how quickly parents should respond to emails, and technology as a form of parent “surveillance” into the
classroom. Participants routinely described administrator and parent demands related to frequency of communication. In addition to school mandated email updates and grade-level newsletters, teachers also manage parent expectations regarding frequency of communication. Teachers reported unrealistic parent expectations about technology related to academic updates, behavioral problems, and the need for continual assignment input. For parents, expectations not only extend to teacher emails, but also to teachers’ use of Grade Speed. Through district implementation of Grade Speed, parents have gained access to teachers’ online grade books, thus granting them the privilege to access grades on a routine basis, beyond traditional grade updates like progress reports and report cards. This access has further increased parental control over the type and frequency of communication, as parents now have greater access to information through school-mandated policies.

In response to greater parental access to information and the growing trend of “over-communicating” to parents, teachers indicated a rise in parents’ unrealistic expectations related to email response. Participants stated parental desire for instant response, despite the limitations on teachers’ schedules, increased their levels of stress due to feelings of constant communication and further complicated parent-teacher communication and interaction. Through the customer-service model currently present in the educational system (Flectcher, 2006), parents assume the position of clients or consumers, and teachers are forced into customer-service roles (Cullingford, 1996; Flectcher, 2006; Vincent 1996). As a result of parent-centeredness and Cullingford’s (1996) “open door policy,” parents are able to demand immediate response and expect for teacher compliance. Furthermore, increases in school and teacher communication with parents coupled with parental demands for instant response create a surveillance function of email. Parents, utilizing email as a tool to maintain constant communication with teachers and to
exert control within schools, rely on technology (email and Grade Speed) to “check-in” on teachers and ensure an education for their children that parents deem appropriate. While researchers (Merkely, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fuhler, 2006), and some participants in this study, have identified a number of advantages of parents using technology to communicate with parents, a high percentage of teachers in the present investigation reported significant concerns about the use of technology in the classroom.

Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study present a number of theoretical implications for both standpoint theory and emotional labor. With regard to standpoint theory, this study expands previous uses of the theoretical framework beyond social constructs of race and sex. To date, scholars (Dougherty, 1999; Harding, 2007) have primarily contextualized standpoint theory to address power issues associated with the constructs of sex and race through a feminist perspective. While other researchers (Allen, 1998; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000; Marshall, 1993) have extended the theory to address standpoint issues within organizations, scholars (Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994; Dougherty, 1999; Dougherty & Krone, 2000; Marshall, 1993) have indicated a need for further exploration of standpoint theory within organizational contexts, specifically with regard to dominant versus non-dominant ideologies. Through the incorporation of a population outside of traditional standpoint theory literature, this study broadens the application of standpoint theory within an organizational context.

The present study extends standpoint theory beyond traditionally studied populations. Researchers (Allen, 1998; Dougherty, 1999; Orbe, 1998) have primarily addressed groups largely conceptualized as marginalized through sex or ethnicity, however, teachers’ narratives
suggest that teachers may assume a marginalized role within the educational system. Teachers, through their educational backgrounds, hold social positioning not typically classified as marginalized or disadvantaged by societal definitions. While the teaching profession is largely comprised of women (TEA, 2002), teachers hold, at minimum, a bachelor’s degree from a four-year university, and traditionally occupy a certain level of power within the educational system (Stafford, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996). However, the school system largely functions as a patriarchal structure, in which teachers’ voices are increasingly marginalized as a result of the more frequent parent-teacher communication. Teachers therefore occupy a marginalized role in the education system when compared to parent and administrator power and influence within the educational system.

Furthermore, this study helped explicate underlying organizational power issues, a point of central concern to standpoint theorists (Harding, 2007; Hartsock, 1987) within the educational system. Beyond the traditional administrator/parent hierarchy lays a power struggle between parents and teachers for control and autonomy in the classroom. The standpoints of teachers related to parent-teacher communication appear consistent with scholars (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996) documentation of a paradigm shift within the educational system, including increased parental involvement (Gibbs, 2005, Jayson, 2007, Landau, 2008; Strauss, 2006) where parents’ voices are privileged over those of teachers. As parents gain additional access to schools and teachers through consistent communication via email and Grade Speed, as well as through more traditional communication forms of phone calls, parent-teacher conferences, and notes home, parents gain control over teachers through increased documentation, unrealistic technology expectations, and a lack of responsibility for their children’s progress and behavior. As a result, teachers feel increasingly marginalized within the educational system, and as a result
experience increased stress and burnout, which contributes to teachers’ intent to quit the profession.

An interesting finding of the present study relates to the impact of computer-mediated communication technology within the classroom. Based upon my findings, I argue that this type of technology, while frequently described as efficient by teachers, results in the unintended consequence of usurping teachers’ power in the classroom. Participants indicated excessive parental demands related to frequency of communication and expectations for email response and updated grades via Grade Speed. Parents’ continuous communication with teachers and their unrealistic expectations for instantaneous response function as a form of surveillance of teachers. D’Urso (2006) explained the use of email as a surveillance tool in the workplace, and specifically focused on the panoptic effect that technology introduces into the workplace. In terms of parent-teacher communication, technological advances and Grade Speed, serve as a point of surveillance for parents to ensure “proper” teacher behavior with regard to managing their children’s education. Foucault (1975) defined the panopticon as an institution or entity of surveillance, which through its continual presence, conditioned subjects into a mode of self-regulation through the internalization of surveillance. He noted that compliance with surveillance induced self-regulation that did not require the physical presence of a guard or watcher, but rather exerted power over the individual through their self-regulation in response to the surveillance medium. Within the educational system, I argue that email and Grade Speed may function as panoptic tools, consistent with scholars’ (D’Urso, 2006; Foucault, 1975) conceptualizations of surveillance as a means to leverage power. Participants indicated that upon entering grades into Grade Speed, or sending out an email regarding class and school news, they anticipated and conditioned themselves to expect immediate responses from parents. Power,
therefore, is exerted through teachers’ perceptions of technology as a tool for parents, and parents gain teacher compliance through teacher self-regulation in the forms of more frequent communication or a quicker response rate. This unintended effect of introducing technology as a medium for parent-teacher communication therefore diminishes teacher power, and forces them into a subordinate position in relation to parents within school districts.

This study also confirmed previous researchers (Adelmann, 1995; Ashforth & Humphrey; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Kruml & Geddes, 2000; Steinberg & Figart, 1999) findings, which have posited a direct relationship between emotional labor and the development of stress and burnout. In this study, participants reported similar experiences, particularly when teachers had to express organizationally appropriate responses that conflicted with personal beliefs, ultimately resulting in the development of emotional dissonance. Scholars (Leidner, 1999; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Steinberg & Figart, 1999) have indicated that when employees project organizationally desired emotions that conflict with personal beliefs, employees engage in more frequent and strenuous forms of emotional labor. Participants indicated a link between parent-teacher communication and the need to couch negative statements or utilize compliments in order to discuss student issues. Many teachers noted the constraining nature of parent-teacher communication and commented on personal desires for open and honest communication, free from organizational standards for communication. Scholars (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Pugliesi, 1999) have established a link between prolonged or chronic use of emotional labor and the onset of stress and burnout; other scholars (Carlyle & Woods, 2002; Dunham, 1992; Kyriacou, 1998; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Saellis, & Parker, 2000) have identified teachers as individuals with a higher propensity for these consequences.
This study confirms researchers’ previous findings related to emotional labor and the onset of stress and burnout, and highlights the increased susceptibility of teachers as a result of parent-teacher communication. Furthermore, the results from this study support direct links between emotional labor, job dissatisfaction, and intent to leave. This finding is particularly important as parent-teacher communication may play a more prominent role in the development of teacher stress and burnout than previously addressed. As evident through participants’ narratives and the statistical data from the MetLife (2005) report on teachers’ work-related perceptions, parent-teacher communication has emerged as one of the “least desirable” or “worst” aspects of teaching. Because of the continuous emotional labor and internal tensions over the display of organizational versus personal beliefs that teachers experience during parent-teacher communication, many participants indicated increased job dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout solely based on this particular aspect of their jobs. Additionally, employees’ feelings of stress and burnout often relate to a desire to leave their respective fields of study. Therefore, these findings of this study may help indicate the role of stress and burnout from parent-teacher communication. Previous researchers (Richardson, Alexander, & Castleberry, 2008) connected emotional labor with intent to quit and this study may connect the stressor of parent-teacher communication to the growing teacher turnover rate in the United States (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Geving, 2007; Viadero, 2005).

These findings also reveal the importance of social support among teachers. As a result of poorly defined expectations and education on parent-teacher communication, many teachers relied on peers and administrators for help in managing the resulting conflict with parents. Researchers (Ray & Miller, 1991, 1994; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 2002) have indicated the benefits of social support in managing job-related stressors. Furthermore, teachers indicated
that peers provided a form of organizational socialization in terms of school norms and expectations for parent-teacher communication. While the current trend in the educational system continues to shift toward a customer service role for teachers (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996), administrators need to develop an awareness of teachers’ struggles as they cope with newfound roles and increasing parental demands. Likewise, peer social support also gains increased importance, as teachers continue to manage parent-teacher communication and re-establish themselves as authority figures within school systems.

Practical Implications

Based on the findings of this study, I have also identified a number of practical implications related to parent-teacher communication. With the increase of parental involvement in schools (Cullingford, 1996; Gibbs, 2005; NEA, 2007; Vincent, 1996), and the propensity for teacher turnover (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Geving, 2007; Viadero, 2005; Yong & Yue, 2008), educators, administrators, and schools officials should strive to help alleviate problems related to what teachers conceptualize as the most stressful aspect of their jobs (MetLife, 2005).

Lack of preparation. Several participants commented on the lack of preparation, through formal college education and highlighted their frustration with their lack of knowledge about parent-teacher communication as new teachers. As a result of the initial ambiguity, many teachers labeled parent-teacher communication as a negative aspect of their jobs. These findings relate to the current programs that help educate prospective teachers; college educators need to revisit curriculum for teachers to include preparation for parent-teacher communication. As parental involvement increases within the educational system, and as schools and districts move
toward a more “consumer-based” approach to interacting with parents, teachers need to be educated on their roles within classrooms and schools in addition to gaining experience managing parent-teacher interactions. While researchers (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991) have noted the emphasis on strategies to help teachers encourage parental involvement in schools, parents appear to have taken this initiative within districts beyond school administrators’ expectations. Emphasis, therefore, college educators should better prepare teachers for parent involvement in schools. Greenwood and Hickman (1991) outlined several methods for strengthening teacher knowledge of parent-teacher interactions, three of which appear particularly relevant in regards to higher education curriculum and practicum.

One potential method to socialize pre-service teachers (education students) includes a parent-teacher communication aspect of teacher practicum. Many participants noted extremely limited experience, if any, learning about and managing parent-teacher communication. In addition to college educators adding content lessons related to understanding and managing parent-teacher communication to collegiate educational department curricula, education students should also apply theoretical research into praxis. While many teachers gain “hands-on” teaching experience through student teaching or practicum courses, one portion of this training should include managing parent-teacher communication. As student teachers, education students should manage parent interactions within their designated classrooms, assuming the same role their mentor teachers do in managing parent-teacher communication on a daily basis. Education curricula should not focus solely on involving parents, which appears as a common theme across teacher education literature (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Rather, educators should focus on the importance of managing parent-teacher communication because of it’s links job
dissatisfaction, stress and burnout, and, ultimately, intent to quit. These findings have been confirmed by the results of this study.

Another important in understanding the significance of pre-service teacher education on parent-teacher communication is inclusion of parent-teacher communication related material on state certification tests. Following completion of coursework, student teaching, and practicum, education students should display their knowledge of “best practices” for managing parent teacher communication. While not every teacher may choose to implement said practices, the formal education and testing related to parent-teacher communication would provide a basic foundation for new teachers.

*Parent education programs.* When discussing parent-teacher communication, many participants indicated the need for a parent-teacher partnership within schools. While the college educational system should better prepare teachers with regard to curriculum and training, K-12 administrators should seek to implement educational initiatives for parents as well. For parent-teacher communication to shift toward an equal partnership, parents must assume more responsibility and accountability for their children. In order to better inform parents about expectations and boundaries related to communication with teachers, school and district administrators should work to develop parent education programs. While researchers (Hupp, 2008; Strauss, 2006) have documented the implementation of such programs in the United States, these programs primarily aim to encourage parental involvement with regard to student homework and at-home methods for student success. Instead, these programs should consist of both at-home methods for student success and appropriate parent-teacher communication. Additionally, Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzer (2002) indicated the lack of success of academic related parent education programs in regards to bolstering student academic
performance and behavior, primarily due to the structure and methods of instruction. This finding suggests a re-conceptualization of current school and district practices in terms of parent education programs.

Furthermore, researchers have conducted little to no research on the effects of “parent orientations” aimed to educate parents on effective and appropriate communication with teachers. Although active parental involvement may promote education as a priority in the home, school officials must also educate parents on appropriate communication with teachers. One method for re-designing current parent education programs is to incorporate principles related to student academic progress, school policies, and standards for parent-teacher communication into a series of parent-orientations at the elementary school, intermediate school, middle school, and high school levels. While school officials currently implement open-houses to help students acclimate into a new educational setting, school and district administrators should also establish similar parent-oriented sessions to help address education-level relevant standards and expectations for parents. Researchers (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991) indicated the need for teacher in-services containing similar content, but I argue that because parent-teacher communication implies involvement on behalf of both parties, school officials need to place more responsibility on parents, from the beginning of their children’s educational careers, on maintaining effective and appropriate communication with teachers and schools. Furthermore, because the levels of parental involvement differ at different stages of K-12 education (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991), these educational programs need to contain differentiated information appropriate for the respective grade level designation.

Defining parent-teacher communication in schools. In order for parent orientation programs to function properly, school administrators need to outline and detail specific school
policies related to parent-teacher interaction, as these policies will outline minimum expectations and standards for parental involvement in schools. Many study participants indicated a lack of formal school expectations, aside from frequency of contact with parents, related to parent-teacher communication. School and district administrators should strive to define policies related to parent-teacher communication further, and take into account the potentially negative effects of parent-teacher communication on parents. These policies, at minimum, should detail expectations for frequency of interaction, administrator support for teachers handling difficult parent-teacher communication, and associated documentation. Moreover, school and district administrators should reconsider the emphasis placed on teacher documentation of parent-teacher communication, as the process of consistent documentation serves to erode teacher power and authority.

Limitations

One primary limitation of this study was the participant ethnicity and gender reporting in comparison to the state of Texas averages. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2002a) reported that 72.5% of teachers in the state of Texas self-identified as white, 17.5% as Hispanic, 9.1% as African-American, 0.7% as Asian, and 0.3% as Native American. In the present study, 96.77% of participants identified as white and only 3.33% as Hispanic. Likewise, the Texas teaching workforce is composed of 77.1% women and 22.9% men. In this study, 84.43% of participants were women and 16.67% were men (TEA, 2002b). While the study participants accurately reflected the ethnicity breakdown for the school district, the sample was not representative of teachers in the state of Texas. Conducting this study in school districts with different racial and
gender demographics might result in different perceptions and reported levels of parent-teacher communication.

Another limitation of the present study is the relatively small sample size (N=30) and sampling from one school district. Researchers (Hoepfl, 1997; Sandelowski, 1995) have indicated that 10 to 50 participant interviews provide substantial data for qualitative studies. However, with 1,228 school districts (TEA, 2009) and as of 2005, 294,258 K-12 teachers in the state of Texas (Texas Comptroller of Public Accountants, 2006), future studies should include a greater number of participants across a variety of districts in order to account for a larger, and more diverse subject population.

A third limitation of this study related to the scope of the project. While this study addressed teachers’ perceptions of parent-teacher communication, participants’ narratives only account for one of four stakeholders in parent-teacher communication. For a more complete analysis of parent-teacher interactions, future studies should include the perspectives of parents, administrators, and students.

Future Research

*Extending research to lower and higher socioeconomic school districts.* In order to determine the depth and breadth of parent-teacher communication and the subsequent effects on teachers’ perceptions about their positioning within the educational system, emotional labor, and outcomes of parent-teacher communication, future researchers should examine districts with families of varying socioeconomic statuses. The present study included teachers from a middle to upper-middle socioeconomic school district. In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of parent-teacher communication, specifically from teachers’ perspectives,
communication studies researchers should further investigate parent-teacher communication on a larger scale. In addition to increasing the number of participants, scholars should also examine parent-teacher communication in lower and higher socioeconomic school districts. Teachers at schools with higher socioeconomic statuses may experience greater parent-teacher communication, or report different experiences than teachers at middle to upper-middle socioeconomic schools. While scholars (Hill et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; Revicki, 1981) have indicated that parental involvement increases with socioeconomic status, parent-teacher communication may also function as a point of stress for teachers in lower socioeconomic schools and districts.

Parent, teacher, and administrator perspectives. Additionally, the present study only included the perspectives of teachers related to parent-teacher communication. Because parent-teacher communication encompasses four entities, administrators, parents, students, and teachers, the incorporation of these respective standpoints would provide for a more comprehensive understanding of teachers’ standpoints in relation to those of parents and administrators. Researchers (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998) noted the differences in parent-teacher perceptions of parent-teacher interaction and parent involvement in schools, and further research related to both parent and teacher perspectives of parent-teacher communication may prove beneficial in understanding the dyadic parent-teacher relationship. Furthermore, future researchers should include administrator perspectives on parent-teacher communication, because participants from this study indicated the need for social support from school administrators, which suggests that administrators influence parent-teacher communication as agents of social support.

Future research examining the effects of computer-mediated communication in the classroom is also needed. Study participants emphasized the positive and negative aspects of
introducing technology as a medium for parent-teacher communication. Potential avenues for this research could include: further explication of the panoptic function of technology, increased workload for teachers, differing perspectives on the proper uses of technology between teachers and parents, and outcomes of these differences in terms of the parent-teacher relationship and teachers’ perceptions of their jobs.

Conclusion

Over the last four decades, national, state, and local educational officials have reshaped the educational system in order to incorporate greater parental involvement, specifically within K-12 public schools (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996). While teachers circa 1960 maintained a level of power and authority in the classroom that created a distinction between the roles of parents and teachers (Cullingford, 1996; Stafford, 1987; Wolfendale, 1996), teachers now report a sense of powerlessness related to parent-teacher communication. This results from the current state of the education system and the creation of a series of unintended consequences for K-12 teachers that stem from increased parent-teacher interaction. Although researchers have indicated the positive aspects of increased parental involvement on student academic progress (Burns, 1993; Morrison, 1978; Penn & Childers, 1993; Swap, 1987), participants in this study outlined a number of unintended consequences of parental involvement including: increased workload, decreased job satisfaction, and increased levels of stress, burnout, and intent to quit the profession. Given the current state of teacher turnover within the educational system (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Geving, 2007; MetLife, 2005), and the high levels of teacher stress related to parent-teacher communication, researchers and school and district administrators
should consider the unintended consequences of continually advocating parental involvement within school systems.

This study identifies teachers’ struggles with parent-teacher communication, and through narratives related to interactions with parents, emotional labor, and stress and burnout, teachers revealed their perceptions of a lack of power within their respective schools and districts specifically related to managing parent-teacher communication. Through the implementation of standpoint theory, teachers’ standpoints appear to contrast with the dominant pro-parent ideology of the educational system, thus marking them as an emergent marginalized group over the past two decades. Teachers’ non-dominant position and resulting lack of power in parent-teacher interactions is increasingly noticeable through the lack of boundaries for parents in schools, as evident through issues of accountability, unrealistic technology expectations, and excessive demands on teachers’ time. The customer-service orientation of the current educational system (Cullingford, 1996; Vincent, 1996) has afforded parents constant access to teachers, especially through technology as a means of surveillance (D’Urso, 2006). Teachers, masking their personal feelings related to parental demands, continually engage in emotional labor, oftentimes akin to emotional dissonance. For study participants, these changes have lead to increased feelings of stress, burnout, and intent to quit. With few outlets for change and little power to shift ideologies within the educational system, teachers noted little improvement in the current state of affairs, and explained increased feelings of job dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout.
APPENDIX A

K-12 TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. The purpose of this interview is to talk about your experiences as a teacher with parents. Your responses will be used as data for the completion of my master’s thesis in communication studies at the University of North Texas.

This discussion should take about 15-20 minutes. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, you do not have to answer questions you do not want to answer, and you may stop the interview at any time if you decide you do not wish to participate. Would you mind if I audiotape this interview?

I want to assure you that I will not use your name nor the school’s name in the study unless given permission to do so. By agreeing to go on, you are providing your consent to participate in this study. Let’s begin.

Demographic information:

Age: Grades taught:

Sex: Grade currently teaching:

Ethnicity: # Years experience:

1. Tell me about a memorable communication experience that you have and with a parent. This could be a face-to-face experience, email, phone, or a combination.

   a. Why was this instance so memorable?

   b. How did communicating with parent affect how you felt about your job?

2. How does communication with parents affect the way you feel about your job?

3. How has technology affected your communication with parents?

4. Have your experiences dealing with parents matched up to the expectations you had prior to beginning your teaching career?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add?
APPENDIX B

K-12 TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. The purpose of this focus group is to talk about your experiences as a teacher with parents. Your responses will be used as data for the completion of my master’s thesis in communication studies at the University of North Texas.

This discussion should take about one hour. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, you do not have to answer questions you do not want to answer, and you may stop the interview at any time if you decide you do not wish to participate. Would you mind if I audiotape this focus group session?

I want to assure you that I will not use your name nor the school’s name in the study unless given permission to do so. By agreeing to go on, you are providing your consent to participate in this study. Let’s begin.

Demographic information:

Age:     Grades taught:
Sex:     Grade currently teaching:
Ethnicity:    #     Years experience:

1. Tell me about a memorable communication experience that you have and with a parent. This could be a face-to-face experience, email, phone, or a combination.
   a. What was this instance so memorable?
   b. How did communicating with that parent affect the way you felt about your job?

2. How does communication with parents affect the way you feel about your job?

3. How has technology affected your communication with parents?

4. Have your experiences dealing with parents matched up to the expectations you had prior to beginning your teaching career?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?
REFERENCES


